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MOLLY'S HUSBAND

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A Master of Deception
Violet Forster's Lover
Twin Sisters
The Interrupted Kiss

CASSELL & CO., LTD
*London, New York, Toronto and
Melbourne*

Molly's Husband

BY
RICHARD MARSH



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. THE BEST MAN	1
2. FRIENDS IN COUNCIL	11
3. A MODERN MOTHER	19
4. HER WEDDING NIGHT	35
5. ON THE CLIFF	42
6. THE QUARTETTE	53
7. BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON	66
8. REPRESENTING MRS. WALLER	79
9. ON THE BOAT	94
10. THE NEW GOVERNESS	109
11. CECILIA	123
12. NOT KNOWN	133
13. CECILIA'S LETTER	144
14. TWO STRANGERS	154
15. MOLLY'S WELCOME	165
16. THE STORY AS TOLD BY MR. STEINMANN	174
17. JOHN WALLER	189
18. GROVES TELLS HIS TALE	198

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
19. A TELEGRAM FOR LADY LUCY	212
20. WHY HARRY DRUMMOND RETURNED TO TOWN	226
21. A LATE VISITOR	238
22. THE TAXI-CABMAN	250
23. REPRESENTING THE FAMILY	266
24. NO. 8 ARCADIA AVENUE	276
25. MR. PELLATT MAKES SOME DISCOVERIES	287
26. SOLICITOR AND COUNSEL	298
27. THE MAN WITH THE RED HAIR	309
28. HARRY'S AUNT	325
29. THINGS WHICH MATTER	335

MOLLY'S HUSBAND

CHAPTER I

THE BEST MAN

THE bride was ready, so was her maid, so was her mother ; they had all three been ready probably for a quarter of an hour, waiting in the room in which the bride had changed, for the coming of the bridegroom. The bride had changed into her going-away dress, her maid, hatted and gloved, stood with her fingers resting on the handle of the dressing-case. The dignity of the bride's mother was becoming more than a little ruffled, the guests were all waiting expectantly below—but still the bridegroom did not come. There was a tapping at the door of the room in which the trio waited. Lady Mitford gave utterance to what was suspiciously like a sigh of relief.

“There he is,” she said.

Binns opened the door ; went out ; remained out ; presently returned with hardly the kind of look on her face which one would have expected.

“Macklin wishes to see your ladyship.” She spoke as if she were almost afraid of her own words. Lady Mitford went out.

Molly's Husband

"Well, Macklin, what is it? Where is Mr. Waller?"

Macklin was a long, lean person with a thin face, who seemed to make it the rule of life to speak in lowered tones. He addressed Lady Mitford then from behind the shelter of his hand, as if he were making her the recipient of a State secret.

"It's a most extraordinary thing, your ladyship, but we can't find Mr. Waller anywhere."

"Can't find him? What do you mean? Isn't Mr. Waller ready? They ought to have started before this, they'll miss the train."

Macklin's manner was, if possible, more confidential than before.

"Mr. Waller's not in the hotel, your ladyship. We've as good as looked in every room, and he isn't in any."

As her ladyship was staring at Macklin as if she wondered what he meant, a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, black-eyed man came towards her from the landing. He had on a frock-coat and a pair of grey trousers, and wore an orange blossom in his button-hole. This was the bridegroom's best man.

"Mr. Eva!" exclaimed her ladyship at the sight of him, "what does Macklin mean, what has become of Mr. Waller? Do you know the train leaves Paddington at four, and it's now twenty minutes to?"

Her ladyship had scarcely ceased speaking when a bedroom door opened and revealed the bride standing on the threshold.

"Mamma," she asked, "what is the matter? What are you all whispering about out there?"

Everyone had noticed in the church how white she was, with a pallor which was curiously inconsistent with the supposititious happiness of a blushing bride; as she faced them in the doorway, her pallor was so intensified that she looked positively ill. Behind Mr. Eva was the manager of the hotel; he opened the door of the adjoining room. Then he said:

"If you would like to speak to these ladies in private, here's a sitting-room."

The bride and her mother found themselves in the sitting-room confronting the best man. The girl addressed her mother.

"Mamma," she asked, "what is the matter? What does all this mean?"

"I am waiting," replied her ladyship, "for this gentleman to give us an explanation. It certainly does not look as if you were going to catch the four o'clock from Paddington."

Mr. Eva looked at her ladyship with something in his glance which was almost hostile; there was even something unfriendly in the smile which seemed to lurk about the corners of his lips. In appearance he was a person whom it would not have been easy for even a practised observer of men and things to classify, except to the extent that he was not what is generally understood as a gentleman and a man of breeding. One felt that

he was not used to wearing a frock coat, that the more unconventional the garments he wore the more he would be at his ease. His voice was rough, his manner ungracious ; there was about the whole man a suggestion of bad tidings from which the two women instinctively shrank. When he did speak, his words were not only brief, they were brutal.

“ Jack Waller has done a bolt.”

“ Done a bolt ! ” Her ladyship involuntarily echoed his words. “ Mr. Eva, what do you wish us to understand by—by such a phrase ? ”

Mr. Eva held out a hand which was large and strong and coarse, a hand which would not be particular about the manner in which it moved obstacles in its way,

“ I’ve no wish that you should understand anything, I’ve no wish in the matter. I merely tell you that Jack Waller has gone—which makes it look as if he had already had enough of marriage.”

The bride moved from him tremulously, as if his words were so many blows he had struck her.

“ Mamma,” she cried, “ what does he mean ? Tell me what he means.”

“ I’ll tell you.” Putting his hands into his trouser pockets, Mr. Eva addressed the bride with a frankness before which she cowered like a frightened child. “ You’re married, Mrs. Waller—I suppose Jack Waller has married you, and that what was done in that very nice church was done for ever. You’ve had a beautiful wedding—I don’t know who paid

The Best Man

for it ; I fancy it cost more than her ladyship would care to throw away—if Jack Waller paid, he's done it very well ; everything always is well done when he pays. There's been a most handsome reception after the wedding—plenty to eat, plenty to drink, everything of the very best. And the company has been as good as the refreshments. I'm not ashamed to tell you that in the whole course of my natural life I never was in a room before with so many real ladies and gentlemen. They've had a good time as far as it's gone—we've all had a good time, not excluding, I hope, the blushing bride. The people are all waiting down below to see the bride and bridegroom start on their happy honeymoon. Each one has got a nice little bag filled with rose leaves to throw after them, because it's felt that shoes are old-fashioned, confetti is vulgar, and rice is worse. But they won't want those rose leaves—they can take those little bags home with them as mementoes of a delightful day. They won't be able to throw them after the bridegroom because he's gone, and the bride, I don't suppose she'll go, and the honeymoon is off—unless, that is, she likes to honeymoon alone, or, perhaps, spend it with her mother. Jack Waller has had enough of married life ; he's not taking any more. He's gone, and gone for good—or, perhaps, I shouldn't wonder if he's gone for better."

The best man paused. The two women regarded him as if they had not the dimmest comprehension

of what he was saying. Lady Mitford admitted that that was the case, so far as she was concerned.

"You are a stranger, Mr. Eva, to me, which is probably why I feel that you express yourself in a manner which is a little beyond my reach. As, clearly, no chance remains of catching the four o'clock train, I think you had better explain matters to my brother."

Her daughter was resting one hand, apparently for support, on the back of a chair. She seemed to be making an effort to hold herself upright, to achieve some show of dignity. A spot of colour showed on either cheek.

"I should like to understand what Mr. Eva says a little more plainly, if you don't mind, mamma ; you see it is rather important that I should, as I—I've only just been married. You say, Mr. Eva, that Mr. Waller has, as you put it, gone away. Do you know this of your own knowledge ?"

The best man's wide mouth was parted in what was rather a grin than a smile ; one felt that he was deriving from the situation, as it developed, an enjoyment which was peculiarly his own.

"Well, I may say—at least I think I may say—that I do."

"Where has Mr. Waller gone ?"

Mr. Eva shook his head—or rather he wagged it.

"Now, there you have me. I know no more where he's gone than—shall we say, you do ; and I don't suppose I could say anything stronger than that."

The Best Man

7

"You are quite sure that you don't know where he's gone?"

The girl looked Mr. Eva in the face with a directness and a steadiness of which she had, a few moments before, scarcely seemed capable. The man met her glance with something in his eyes which the girl seemed to feel was intended as an insult.

"I'm as sure that I don't know where he has gone as you are, Mrs. Waller—of course, I take it that you are Mrs. Waller. A wife does not always need to have her hnsband at her side to be a married woman, does she?"

"You have no idea where he has gone, no suspicion—or where he is going? Please answer me truthfully, Mr. Eva."

"I am telling you the plain truth, Mrs. Waller; I repeat that I have no more idea, or suspicion, or notion, of where he is going, or has gone, than you have."

"Had you any idea, or suspicion, that he intended to go?"

Mr. Eva put his head on one side, regarding her like some huge bird of ill omen.

"Now you ask rather a delicate question, especially as I want to give you all the information I can—because I recognise that you are in an awkward situation, Mrs. Waller. I didn't know that he was going; he never breathed a word on the subject to me, but directly I got into the church I thought it possible he might go—quick."

"What made you think that?"

"I saw it on his face, in his eyes, all over him. Mind you, he never said a word to me, and I never said a word to him ; but it was borne in on me that as soon after he had quitted the church as he conveniently could he'd cut short his married life."

"But there must have been some reason why this was, as you put it, borne in on you, Mr. Eva. What was the reason ?"

"Instinct, my dear young lady, instinct, that's all." He glanced at his watch. "You'll excuse me, ladies, but my duties are done. I acted as best man to—oblige a casual acquaintance——"

"How long have you known Mr. Waller ?" put in the bride quickly.

Mr. Eva looked her very straight in the face ; he spoke with much deliberation.

"In any real sense of knowing, I don't know him at all."

"Then why did he ask you to be his best man if you are a stranger ?"

"He didn't ask me."

"He didn't ask you ? What do you mean—he didn't ask you ?"

"I heard by accident that he was going to be married, and I happened to meet him, and I said, 'Jack, I'll be your best man,' and I was. And, my duties being done, I'll say good-day."

"Stay one moment, Mr. Eva. Before you go you must see my brother." There was a tapping at the door. "Perhaps this is he—I know he'll be wonder-

ing what has become of us. Come in." There entered a short, stout gentleman with a red face, a scantily covered head, and a white moustache. "Mr. Eva, this is my brother, Colonel Adams. Frederick, Mr. Eva has just been giving us the most astounding intelligence that Mr. Waller, who, only half-an-hour ago, married my daughter, your niece, has—I hardly know how to put it—gone, no one knows where."

"Yes, and now I'm going. Glad to have made your acquaintance, colonel; I hope to improve it on some future occasion. This afternoon I have an engagement which I must keep, and which is already overdue."

The best man was moving towards the door. Lady Mitford exclaimed :

"I insist upon your staying."

As Mr. Eva looked at her he grinned.

"That's very good of you, Lady Mitford. You're not the first lady who's insisted; but, all the same, I'm going."

The lady exclaimed to Colonel Adams: "Frederick stop him!"

"My dear Lucy," remonstrated the colonel, "how on earth am I to stop the man when he has already gone?"

Mr. Eva certainly had gone past, but that was because the colonel had drawn aside to let him go. Outside the room Mr. Eva turned.

"Don't you worry, colonel; you couldn't have stopped me if you wanted to. Whenever I set

Molly's Husband

out to do a thing, no one ever yet has stopped me from doing it. I've not the pleasure of knowing you very well, but I shouldn't say that you are the kind of man that would have the slightest chance." The best man advanced towards the staircase. "Hallo, here are all these good people waiting in the hall." He raised his voice, apparently addressing an unseen crowd below. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you are waiting to see the bride and bridegroom start upon their honeymoon, you're just wasting your time. I don't know what value your time may be; I'll pay you the compliment of supposing it's worth something; but you're wasting it, whatever it is. The bride and bridegroom are not going to start upon their honeymoon—there's going to be no honeymoon. The bridegroom has started off on his lonesome; he's left his bride behind; he prefers his own company. I never heard of a bride, however much of a wife she may be, who started off on her honeymoon with no one but herself for company. So if you've eaten all there is to eat, and drunk all there is to drink, if you'll take my advice, you'll go. There's no reason why you shouldn't take those pretty little bags with the rose leaves with you. They might come in handy for another wedding at which the bride and bridegroom *do* start upon their honeymoon—they won't be wanted for this. This wedding is over, and Mr. and Mrs. John Waller's married life as well."

CHAPTER II

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL

THE relatives and friends of the family were gathered together in the sitting-room. The best man having departed, they came crowding in. There was quite a gathering—Sarah, Countess of Petersfield, the head of the family, sister of the bride's mother; another sister, Lady Henshaw, and her husband, Sir Penberthy Henshaw. There was Marmaduke Prideaux, an elderly cousin in the diplomatic service, and General Delany, on the retired list, besides quite a number of others, he's and she's. It would not have been easy to determine on what grounds some of them claimed to be either relations or friends of the family. Since the marriage had been arranged throughout upon the most approved commercial lines, it was perhaps only proper that there should be two solicitors present—Mr. Peacock, of Peacock, Haines, and Boulter, who had represented the bridegroom's interests, and Mr. Arthur Rye, of Rye and Dunster, who had acted for the bride, or perhaps it would be more correct to say for that young lady's mother. The bride's mother was there, but the bride had vanished—that she was alone in the next room, on her knees,

with her face on the bed quilt, wrestling with phantoms of horror, no one seemed either to know or care. They squabbled about her in her absence.

"Never heard such a thing in my life! I can't understand it now! To me it seems incredible that a man should marry my niece—my niece, by gad! —a man of whom no one knows practically anything—"

"That's the point," interposed the Countess, "what does anyone know about this man?"

Although the question was apparently addressed to the open air, her eyes were on her sister. Her brother, Colonel Adams, whom she had so ruthlessly interrupted, endorsed, as it were, her inquiry.

"Exactly, precisely, just so. That is the point, and a very strong point too. What does anybody know?"

And he looked towards Lady Mitford. Even under the trying circumstances of the case, her ladyship bore herself with that calmness which had never been known to desert her.

"At any rate," she declared, "the settlements were perfectly all right."

"That is so." Mr. Rye adjusted his waistcoat; he was a dapper little man, famed for his wardrobe; the waistcoat he was wearing was a work of art. "There is no doubt whatever that the settlements were perfectly in order—not the least loop-hole for any irregularity there."

"But what," demanded General Delany, "is the

use of settlements without the man ? A girl wants a husband, I suppose, no matter what the settlements are."

"At any rate to begin with ; it is not easy to imagine a marriage in which the husband is missing from the very first."

"But where can the man have gone ? What does he mean by his behaviour ?" This was Lady Henshaw—she looked at Mr. Peacock. "May I ask, sir, if, acting as Mr. Waller's legal representative, you have any explanation to offer ?"

"Absolutely none." Mr. Peacock's manner was suave, but final. Lady Henshaw persisted—she was famed in the family for her powers of resistance.

"But, as Mr. Waller's man of business, you must have some acquaintance with his plans, his intentions, his movements.

"My acquaintance with Mr. Waller is one purely of business ; it is confined to the office. I knew, of course, that he was going to be married, and I was honoured by an invitation to the wedding. Beyond that I knew, and know, nothing."

"I presume that the settlements are in order, that at any rate you know as much as that, Mr. Peacock ?"

This was Sir Penberthy Henshaw, a big, burly man, white haired ; he eyed the solicitor from under overhanging eyebrows. Mr. Peacock continued to be suave.

"On that point I refer you to Mr. Rye ; the

duty of each is to his client, and, if you will excuse my saying so, to his client only."

"The settlements are all right, you need have no doubt, Sir Penberthy, on that score. On that side the lady's interests are quite secure."

"Suppose," continued Sir Penberthy, "if it is permitted to suppose what I hope and trust to be unsupposable"—like himself, his speech was ponderous—"Suppose Mr. Waller does, for any reason whatever, not take up his duties as a husband, on what footing would his young wife be then? She would, of course, have her settlements?"

"Most certainly she would have her settlements."

"And as regards the rest of his property—the house which I understand he has taken in Berkeley Square; the place which he has bought in Sussex, and—his other possessions; suppose—as I have already said what I hope to be the unsupposable—suppose Mr. Waller were not to reappear, what, as regards them, would be his young wife's position?"

"A wife's position in such matters is not necessarily affected by such accidents as her husband's absence. If, for instance, Mr. Waller has taken it into his head to go—without notice—for a jaunt round the world, leaving no instructions as to what is to be done with his various belongings during his absence, I doubt if anyone could prevent his wife doing with them very much as she chose; the wife, I think the law would say, in such a case, is the husband's other self."

"Then that's all right," observed the Countess.

"You may take it from me, Countess, that Mr. Waller has property—there is no doubt about that."

Mr. Peacock echoed Mr. Rye. "No doubt whatever."

"You people," commented Mr. Prideaux, "are talking as if you were speaking of a person who is already dead. You'd look rather odd if Mr. Waller were to open the door and catch you at it."

"I wish he would open the door. I'd say a few words to him—after missing the four o'clock train at Paddington, and putting us to all this inconvenience." This was Lady Mitford. "I have given notice for my rooms, and am leaving them to-morrow. What am I to do, I should like to know, with his wife and her maid? It's a dreadful position for me to be in."

"It is also rather hard," observed Mr. Prideaux, "on his wife. Who is this Mr. Eva, who takes it so much for granted that the bridegroom has gone?"

He seemed to be addressing his question to the bride's mother, who answered it, as if the subject were not at all a pleasant one.

"I have not the faintest notion; he's a dreadful creature, whoever he is, I never saw him till this morning, and I shall be quite willing never to see him again; to the best of my recollection I never before heard his name."

"Who is Mr. Eva?" Mr. Prideaux looked at Mr. Peacock, who shook his head.

"I've no notion. I didn't know his name was

Eva till a few moments ago ; the first time I noticed him was when he stood on the staircase making that little speech of his."

"He seems to be distinctly a character. I am informed that Mr. Waller has a valet. Don't you think, if he's still about the house, he had better be sent for before he takes himself off ? We may get some grains of information from him."

Acting on Mr. Prideaux's suggestion, the valet was sent for, and presently came. As if by common consent, Mr. Prideaux acted as examiner.

"What is your name ?"

"Benjamin Macklin, sir."

"You are Mr. Waller's valet ; how long have you been in his service ?"

The man seemed to be considering. "Rather more than a year, sir."

"You are aware that Mr. Waller is —missing ; can you throw any light upon his absence ? When, for instance, did you first miss him ?"

"Well, sir, he came back from the church in the motor with Mrs. Waller ; he came into the hall and gave me his hat and gloves ; then he went with Mrs. Waller into the room where the reception was to be held, and that was the last I saw of him."

"A valet is sometimes in his master's confidence. Had you any reason to suppose that, to put it plainly, anything was wrong, or—irregular—that he might disappear ?"

"Well, sir, when he came in last night, I told him

that I'd finished the packing, and I asked him if there were any instructions he would like to give—I meant as regards the luggage or anything of that sort. He was standing at the table, with his back to me, knocking the ash off his cigar. 'Thank you, Macklin,' he said, 'there are no instructions ; I don't suppose you've omitted anything, and—I shall want very little where I'm going.' I thought that a very odd thing for him to say, seeing that we were going down to the Duke of Aldborough's place, which his grace had very kindly lent for the honeymoon. 'You'll find that you will want a good many things at The Canons, sir,' I said. 'Shall I ?' he said, 'I think not. Good night.' So I went. Looking back, that seems a queer thing for him to have said—that was the only hint I had that anything was going to happen."

"Was there anything peculiar about his manner—not only just then, but during the last few days ?"

"He's kept laughing all the morning, though as a rule he's a gentleman who never laughs. 'You seem in very high spirits, sir,' I ventured to remark as he was dressing. 'You'd be if you were in my place, wouldn't you, Macklin ?' and I had my doubts. I'm not what you might call of a marrying disposition, and if I ever was to marry it wouldn't be because I couldn't help it." Macklin's countenance as he delivered himself of this quaint observation was a study. "I hinted as much to Mr. Waller. 'It isn't only the fact that it's my wedding day,' he said, 'it's the joke, Macklin, it's the joke.' What he meant I

couldn't say ; there are some who wouldn't look upon their wedding day as a joke, not in any possible sense. Looking back, I've been wondering if he was thinking of one kind of joke while I was thinking of another."

As he observed the valet there was something very like a twinkle in Mr. Prideaux's eyes, as if he suspected that between this man and himself there might be an unspoken bond of sympathy.

" You are of opinion, Macklin, that Mr. Waller might be the kind of person to leave his bride to go on her honeymoon alone ? "

" Well, sir, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but he did say that something was a joke, and—it is an unusual thing to do, sir, isn't it ? "

CHAPTER III

A MODERN MOTHER

LADY LUCY MITFORD occupied rooms in Eccleston Square, she and her daughter. The maid, Binns, was quite a recent acquisition, only rendered possible by the fact of the approaching marriage. They were not bad rooms of their kind, but that was not a kind which her ladyship liked. She hated, as she put it, to be shut up in pokey rooms with a chit of a girl, even though the girl was her own daughter—especially in Pimlico. Although she put South Belgravia on her letter paper, she never concealed from her friends that she lived in Pimlico. She preferred the Continent ; she declared that a woman of narrow means could live on the Continent as she never could in England, which, from her point of view, was probably true enough. The wedding was on a Tuesday ; she was vacating her rooms on Wednesday and going straight to Aix-les-Bains. She liked Aix-les-Bains ; she liked to go there late in May or early in June, before the people came, and stay there while they were coming—and afterwards. There are so many things that a woman of limited means can do at Aix-les-Bains if she knows her way about that she certainly cannot do in England.

Her feelings as she returned in a taxi-cab from the Hotel Belgravia, where the reception had been held, to the rooms in Pimlico, are not to be translated into words. Her daughter, the newly-made Mrs. John Waller, was by her side. Binns, the expert lady's maid, was left behind at the hotel to spend the night. Nothing, her ladyship had declared, would induce her to have her at Eccleston Square. With her tongue—her ladyship credited all ladies' maids with what she called tongues—what might she not say?

It was bad enough to have Molly. Not once during that very curious transit did the mother and daughter exchange a word. Her ladyship was conscious that in her daughter's attitude, as she sat there stiff, rigid, silent, there was something which had never been there before. For a modern daughter, Molly had always been most amenable. What she might be in the immediate future her ladyship did not care to think. That was not one of the least galling parts of the situation.

Mr. Nockolds, the landlord, opened the door. Her ladyship had had a telegram sent advising him and his wife that she was returning with her child. Outwardly Mr. Nockolds was the most discreet of men; within she knew that he was devoured by ravening curiosity. He did not say a word as they entered, nor did she speak either. In the passage was Mrs. Nockolds, who, again outwardly, was all smiles.

"This is a most unexpected pleasure. Will"—she hesitated—"Miss Molly stay the night?"

"My daughter is now Mrs. Waller." Her ladyship said this with her most stately air. The moment the landlady's back was turned she said to her daughter: "That woman was in the church, I saw her. She knows all about it, with her Miss Molly!"

The girl said nothing; she retired to the privacy of her own room, that dark and rather fusty apartment which only a very short time ago she thought she had left for ever.

The scene which her ladyship had expected—which, indeed, she knew was inevitable—took place a little later. She dined alone. Molly not only declined to come in to dinner, she refused to have any taken to her. Her ladyship had known many vicissitudes; her lines had sometimes run into queer places; but never in the worst of her times had she had such a meal, with such ghosts at her table. As she was finishing the repast there came a message from Molly asking her if she could see her afterwards in the drawing-room. Her ladyship recognised how ominous it was that her daughter should think it necessary to observe such ceremony.

Molly was small; it was one of her grievances that nature had not fashioned her on larger lines. That nature had bestowed on her a daintiness which was quite unusually fascinating was not sufficient

consolation ; she would have liked to be two inches taller.

"I am so little," she was wont to say, "that everybody sits on me. It's absurd. I have a feeling that I shall go through life looking and being treated as though I were a child. I want to grow up—to there."

And she would raise her small hand above her head to the point which she desired to reach.

Lady Mitford found on entering the drawing-room that her daughter awaited her. She started when she saw her.

"Molly !" she exclaimed, "why are you dressed like that ?"

"I'm in mourning," said the bride, "am I not in mourning ?"

As regards her attire she certainly looked as if she were. She had hunted out her one black frock, which had not been packed with her trousseau, and put it on. She presented a picture of woe. Her mother showed signs of irritation ; her tone was acid.

"I do trust, Molly, that you will do nothing ridiculous or make matters worse than they are. What do you mean by putting on a dress like that on your wedding day ?"

"My wedding day ? Mamma, what courage you have—fancy calling this my wedding day ! I feel as if I had been attending my own funeral ; indeed I have."

"Please don't be absurd, and kindly understand that I'm in no mood for high-faluting rubbish. This is your wedding day and not your funeral. The whole world is in front of you to do with as you please."

Molly looked at her mother with a smile which was so like tears that it hurt even her ladyship to see it; her words, though they were clearly and unfalteringly spoken, seemed to come from her like so many sobs.

"What a number of unhappy girls there must be in England if I am the happiest. I do hope there isn't one who is unhappier than I am."

Her mother tried to be severe; she seemed to find it difficult.

"You are aware what an objection I have to scenes of any kind. If you feel like one we had better postpone our conversation till you don't."

"We must understand each other to-night."

"I'm perfectly willing if there's anything to what you call 'understand.' Directly you show the slightest signs of hysterics I shall ask you to excuse me. I'm not an hysterical woman myself, and I've not brought you up to be one. Nothing is ever gained by allowing—shall I say, sentiment?—to get the better of one's common sense."

"Mamma, who is this man I'm supposed to have married?"

"Supposed to have married? You are as much married to Mr. Waller as I was to your father."

"Did father run away from you on his wedding-day?"

"Your husband has certainly not behaved well in that respect, though I cannot but feel that an adequate explanation will presently be forthcoming. It will be in your power, when it does come, to punish him."

"Mamma, who is Mr. Waller?"

"Fancy asking me such a question about your own husband!"

"I know practically nothing about him, except that I went through a form of marriage with him to-day in church. I met him first of all at Monte Carlo, where he was pleased to pay me what you call 'attentions,' which I did not like at all. I have met him frequently since, in London, at people's houses; wherever I was he seemed to be, I have no doubt with your connivance."

"My connivance! What a word to use! Isn't it a mother's duty to do her utmost to have her daughter properly settled in life?"

"You have not answered my question. Who is Mr. Waller?"

"If you had given him the slightest encouragement he would, no doubt, have been pleased and proud to make you his confidante and tell you all you wished to know."

The girl stuck to her point. Her face was very white, her eyes seemed very near to tears, yet there was about her a suggestion of de-

termination which her mother seemed to find surprising.

“Did he tell you who he was? Did he make of you his confidante?”

“Do you imagine for a single instant that I should have allowed him to frequent your society had he not been furnished with satisfactory credentials?”

“Who is he?”

“He is a man of immense wealth—you know he is. Look at his generosity to you. Could any one have given you more handsome presents? Hasn’t he settled on you five thousand a year, which you are at liberty to do just as you like with? Hasn’t he taken for you a house in Berkeley Square which he has furnished regardless of cost, as well as a magnificent place in Sussex, leaving no stone unturned to provide you with as handsome an establishment as any woman has in town?”

“You have not answered my question. Who is he?”

“Why will you keep repeating your ridiculous question as if you were a parrot? Haven’t I told you who he is?”

“Who was his father?”

“I have not the faintest notion. What do I care who his father was? or what need you? You were not in a position to insist upon a man who was prepared to make such settlements taking down his genealogical tree.”

“Where did he get his wealth from? In what

trade or profession was he? He has only been in London, I believe, quite a little while. Where was he before he came to London, and what was he doing there?"

"Isn't it rather late in the day to ask such questions?"

Mother and daughter eyed each other. Lady Mitford prided herself on her capacity to stare people out of countenance; on that occasion it was her gaze which wavered and fell. The girl's glance never faltered.

"Is that the position, mamma, you're going to take up, really? You knew I was afraid of him—"

"Afraid of him! The idea! What stuff you talk! You might be a baby!"

"I have been a baby in your hands, haven't I, mamma? I was afraid of him, and I am afraid of him. If he were to come into the room at this moment I should be more afraid of him than ever. In one sense, I cannot tell you how thankful I am that he has gone."

"Then what do you complain of? You are a rich woman, without impediment of any sort or kind—as you yourself suggest, even the impediment of a husband."

"But you weren't afraid of him, mamma, although you knew I was. I often told you so. Do you mean to say that you knew nothing at all about him—that you never asked him

any questions, never tried to get any information about him from anyone—that you sold me to a man of whom you knew absolutely nothing except that he was rich?"

"Sold you! What a word to use to your mother whose one fault is that she has tried to do her very best for you!"

"It doesn't look like it, does it, mamma? or you and I wouldn't be like we are, talking like this." Lady Mitford made as if to speak; her daughter stopped her with a gesture. "Please let me finish. You're going to listen to me this time, although you never have done so before. This shameful position I'm in is your fault from first to last—all your doing. I am nineteen years old—and it is just as though you had murdered me."

"How dare you say such a thing to me, you wicked girl!"

"My life has ended before it's begun. I'm married, though single. The home which other women have will never be mine. I'm a pariah, an outcast; everybody will be able to point at me a finger of scorn as the young girl who married an old man for his money—an old man who made of me a public laughing-stock by running away from me within an hour of our marriage. People will say I must be some dreadful creature; that he found out some awful thing about me, something which made him fly from me as if I were a leper. And it is all the harder on me because you made me marry

him. You ordered me to marry him, telling me that if I disobeyed your orders you would never treat me like a daughter again. And now—see what has come of my obedience."

Lady Mitford, rising from her seat, took a cigarette from a case which was on the mantel, put it between her lips and lighted it. She was as tall as her daughter was short, rather squarely built, a tailor-made woman, still in the prime of life, her capacity for enjoyment as strong as ever it was, strong both in mind and body—of a certain sort, a typical modern woman. As she smoked her cigarette she eyed her daughter dispassionately, as if she were wondering, as she often had done, how she came by such a child—one who was in all respects such an entire contrast to herself. Her tone when she spoke was almost judicial, as if she were considering the situation with an air of aloofness, as one with which she had no personal concern.

"I admit, Molly, that at this moment it doesn't look as though I had made such a success of matters as I might have done; all the same, I did what was best for you, according to my lights. Since we are both of us in a candid mood, I hope you won't consider it indelicate when I tell you that before you appeared it was my intention to marry Mr. Waller myself."

"I wish you had done, with all my heart!"

"I also wish I had. I certainly shouldn't have made a fuss had he chosen to leave me at the church

door—if he had made the settlements on me which he has made on you, and left me in enjoyment of all his worldly possessions. I am older than you, naturally; still, I may say that I'm the more up-to-date."

"I've not the slightest doubt about it; I never had."

"I'm still not an old woman; I've only just turned forty. I should have made a much more suitable wife for him than you; only—he didn't see it. He so obviously preferred you."

"I wish he hadn't."

"I daresay; only, since he did, I saw no reason why so much money should be lost to the family. Really, Molly, I don't think you have so much to grumble at. Where you got your vein of sentiment from I can't imagine. I was never sentimental. It seems to me that you have the advantage of marriage without its drawbacks—even if Mr. Waller continues to keep himself in the background. You have money, position, and what you never have if a husband makes himself too obvious—freedom."

The girl shivered, as if someone had suddenly touched her with icy fingers.

"It is strange, mamma, how different your point of view is from mine. Are you seriously suggesting that I should use the money—of this gentleman to whom I am supposed to be married—"

"Please don't keep reiterating that nonsensical phrase—supposed to be married. If you don't mean to use his money, what do you propose to do with

it? You can give it, my dear child, to me. I can always find use for anybody's money. Come, Molly, don't try to pose as a heroine. Be practical. Let's discuss ways and means. I suppose, for the moment you'll have to give me house room."

"Where am I to do that, mamma, since I have no house?"

There was a direct simplicity about the girl's manner which the mother seemed to find a trifle disconcerting.

"Aren't you going to live in either of your husband's houses? You'll put yourself in the wrong if you don't."

"I am not. From this day forward he is going to be to me as if he had never been. I am not going to use his money, nor the presents which he gave me, nor have anything to do with anything that was ever his. I suppose I had better continue to wear his wedding ring, to serve as a reminder; but his engagement ring and his other rings I will not wear. I am going to have them packed with his other things and sent to his solicitors."

"Excuse me, Molly, but you'll do nothing of the kind. I will take very great care that you do nothing so ridiculous."

"I'm not going to discuss the matter, mamma: I have told you what I am going to do. If I had not obeyed you against my own better judgment I should not be in the difficult position I am. In this matter, in the future, I am to be influenced by my own

sense of right and wrong ; not by yours. I am going to continue to call myself Mrs. Waller ; if again only to serve as a reminder ; but, as regards all else, this episode in my life is closed for ever. That is what I wish you to understand, mamma."

The girl turned as if to leave the room. Her mother checked her.

"One moment, Molly, if you please. I quite admit that your attitude is in keeping with what I presume are your notions of what is proper for a heroine of romance, but would you mind putting that heroine pose behind you for a moment or two, and coming to plain commonplace ? As you are aware, my tenancy of these rooms is up to-morrow morning. What are you going to do when, to-morrow morning, I give them up and start by the eleven o'clock boat-train for Aix-les-Bains ? "

"Can't I come with you ? "

"The expenses connected with your wedding have been very heavy ; I have had to pay some of them, I couldn't go to Mr. Waller for every penny. Cash with me is almost a minus quantity ; I certainly cannot afford to pay your fare to Aix, nor do I particularly wish for your company if I could. This eccentric conduct of Mr. Waller's hits me as well as you ; you seem to be ignoring that. As I happen to know, you are at present in possession of a very large sum of money. About five thousand pounds is standing to your credit at your bankers. As you are aware, Mr. Waller transferred that amount to your

account only a few days ago ; that has not vanished, if he has. In this—to repeat a phrase—moment of candour, we had better be quite plain with each other, hadn't we ? I wash my hands of you, my dear Molly, financially, and to a very large degree in any other sense. Henceforward I propose to look after myself, and myself only. You are in every sense in a much better position than I am, and again, in every sense, much better able to look after yourself than I am. So when, as I said, I start to-morrow morning for Aix, what do you propose to do ?"

"Do you mean, mamma, that you won't let me come with you ?"

"I presume, if you pay your own expenses and mine, my maternal sense of duty will have to suffer you. But, quite frankly, my dear Molly, I'd much rather be without you. I have formed certain plans with which your presence would seriously interfere. If it had not been for your presence at Monte Carlo I think it is quite possible that Mr. Waller would have married me. I think it is possible that at Aix-les-Bains I may be asked to enter for the second time into the estate of holy matrimony, and I don't want your presence to interfere with me again ; so, if I must have you with me, you, on your part, must make it worth my while. I tell you arrangements can easily be made to draw on your husband's resources to practically any extent. In the meantime, with part of the five thousand pounds which is already standing

to your credit, you can make it very well worth my while. But, quite frankly and without meaning to be in the least unkind, if you don't see your way to make it worth my while I go alone to Aix-les-Bains by the boat-train to-morrow morning."

"I see. Now I think, mamma, I do understand."

"That is what you wanted to do, isn't it?"

"Yes, that is what I wanted to do."

"And how is it going to be? Don't strain yourself, Molly, in an effort to wear an air of tragedy; you're not cut out for that kind of thing at all; besides, there's nothing to be tragic about. Am I to go alone or are you coming with me—on terms?"

"I will think it over, mamma, and let you know in the morning."

"The morning will be rather late. I shall have to be out of this before ten, and to pay my rent before I go; as I'm in arrears, that will leave me rather short; but I am sure that Mrs. Nockolds will not let me go unless I do pay. If you propose to stay you'd better let her know to-night, in case she's proposing to make other arrangements."

"I cannot let you know to-night, or her either, but I'll let you both know in the morning."

This time, as she spoke, the sob in the girl's voice was audible; she rushed from the room as if anxious above all else to conceal the fact that she was breaking down. Lady Mitford stood looking at the door through which she had vanished with a contemplative look in her clear grey eyes.

"She's a very nice girl, Molly ; but I've more than once wished that she was somebody else's daughter. I'm not sure that I don't wish it now. To judge from the appearance which things have at present, it doesn't look as if I were going to gain much by having a millionaire for a son-in-law."

CHAPTER IV

HER WEDDING NIGHT

MOLLY's bedroom was not a very cheerful apartment; it was small, ill-furnished, not particularly clean. There was about it that indefinable air of mustiness which is to be found sometimes in furnished apartments in old London houses. The apartment harmonised with Molly's mood. She went rushing in, locked the door behind her, threw herself face downwards on the bed, and cried. Slight and fragile though she seemed, she was not, as a rule, of a crying sort. She had not been brought up in a tearful school; exhibitions of emotions of any sort or kind Lady Mitford very much disliked. Apparently the moment had come in which the girl had to give vent to her feelings somehow; so she cried—on her wedding day.

Not for very long. Presently she turned, perched herself on the side of the bed, and clenched her little fists.

“I won’t cry, I will not, I won’t.”

Her reiteration suggested that all means would have to be employed to get herself to the sticking point.

With a handkerchief she carefully wiped her eyes.

Going to the dressing-table, she examined herself in the looking-glass.

"A pretty sight I look!" She sighed. "I am one of those people who, if they are unhappy, grow old in less than no time; I wish I were a very old woman now, so that I needn't have to keep on living much longer." She put a truant lock back behind her ear; it was not easy to keep her hair in what she considered proper order. "If it were not for the shame and—I don't know what, I'd be glad he's gone. I don't know if it is wicked to say so, but I am, and I hope I shall never, never see him again: I don't care if that is wicked either. Though what I am to do if mamma does go in the morning and won't take me with her I cannot think."

Looking round, as if in search of a solution, her glance rested on something which she had not hitherto noticed—two envelopes on the top of the shabby chest of drawers. She went quickly to them and snatched them up. One was a large, square envelope, seemingly stuffed as full as it could hold. When she saw the writing on it she changed colour, sinking on to the one chair which the room contained, as if all at once something had caused her to need its support. In one hand she held the envelope, the other she pressed to her side—she was trembling. Presently, raising the envelope, she stared at the address, as if about it there was something uncanny; then, drawing a long breath, as if by its aid she brought herself to a great resolution, she tore it open.

Within was a sheet of paper, and rather a curious collection. She regarded, first of all, the sheet of paper, on which were half a dozen lines of writing. There was no address, no date, and no ceremonious commencement.

“I have been travelling up-country, and have, therefore, only just received your communication, which I found waiting me on my return. I have no comment to make. I return herewith everything which, I believe, I have of yours.

“I wish you every happiness.—H. D.”

At the foot of the page there were a few words which might be regarded as a postscript.

“Since writing the above, I have decided to return at once to England.”

The hand which held the sheet of paper dropped on to her knees ; she sat motionless, looking in front of her, seemingly oblivious of the fact that the big, square envelope had fallen to the ground. She sat there in what her mother might have called “that moonstruck attitude” for quite a time, then, raising the sheet of paper, she read again what was on it. Having made an end of reading it, she made on it a comment :

“Harry !” That was her comment ; and it was an example of how much meaning can be conveyed in a single word when a woman, even a young girl, puts her whole self into it.

She picked up the envelope. Its contents were of the queerest kind. There were a number of

letters—from her to him. She looked at the first words of one of them, and she gasped as if she found it hard to breathe. There were some most curious trifles, a soiled white kid glove—she remembered quite well the absurd occasion on which she had let him take it—and now he had sent it back to her. A pale pink ribbon which she had once worn about her throat; some faded flowers; a buckle which had once been on her shoe—the most ridiculous things. In high places there are queer relics of the saints and martyrs; the relics in that big, square envelope were no less queer than some of those.

To her they spoke of something sacred, as apparently they had done to him. She placed the envelope and its contents, including the piece of paper, on the quilt; she knelt by the bedside and she prayed. What she said in her prayer she alone knew. When she rose from her knees she put everything back into the envelope, and then she saw the other envelope.

This was an ordinary envelope; the handwriting on the face of it left her unimpressed. She opened it with an air, as if she felt sure that its contents would have no interest for her; but they had, which was not surprising since they were of rather a singular kind. The communication it contained was typewritten—it also had no formal opening.

"The man you know as John Waller has gone for ever. You will never see him again—or hear of him. You may consider yourself fortunate because

he is a thief. The money he had was not his at all; nor was the money which he gave you. It belongs to others. Restitution will be required of you in due course. You will have to account for every pound you spend. So be careful with other people's property. Every farthing which he stole will have to be restored. You will be held responsible now that he has gone for ever. Even if you were his wife, in fact, that would make no difference. You had no more right than he had to use for your own purposes what belongs to other people.

"This is a friendly warning. If you are wise you will not require it to be repeated—lest worse befall you."

There the distinctly remarkable communication ended as informally it had began, without signature or initial, or anything to show from whom it might have come. Molly read it several times, as if she were anxious to get its meaning clearly into her head.

"So whoever sent this says he is a thief. I shouldn't be surprised. I shouldn't wonder at anything where he's concerned. The person who sent this needn't be afraid; I'm not likely to touch what belonged to him, or, as it seems, what didn't belong to him, in spite of mamma."

A handbag was on the dressing-table. From it she took a gold chain purse—a good-sized one. It was stuffed with banknotes; there were probably thirty or forty, and some gold coins as well.

"That is my own money ; at least, I suppose it is my own money, since Cousin Marmaduke gave it me. Though why he gave it me I don't know, unless it was that he supposed that as I was getting plenty from my husband he might as well give me a little more ; this is the first time he ever did give me any. What he did give me is likely to be of more use than he imagined."

In a corner of the room was an old brown leather bag ; not a very large one, and so worn that it had not been considered respectable enough to form part of the bridal luggage. She opened it and laid it on the bed. She examined the contents of the chest of drawers. There were some odds and ends of clothing which had belonged to her unmarried days, which had been regarded as altogether unsuitable to a person of Mrs. Waller's importance.

Three or four old frocks hung against the wall on pegs screened by a curtain—they had been treated as being in the same category. She congratulated herself on the fact.

"It's lucky they were left, or what I should have done I cannot think."

She made a selection from these various garments, which she packed into the old brown bag. Then she hunted out some notepaper from one of the dressing-table drawers and scribbled a note—the envelope in which she placed it she addressed simply "Lady Lucy Mitford." She propped it up in a conspicuous place against the looking-glass. Then

Her Wedding Night

41

she looked at her watch. It was nearly eleven o'clock.

“There's time if I hurry. The question is, how am I to get this bag downstairs to the front door without being overheard? I won't stay if I am; nothing shall keep me; but I'd much rather get away without a fuss if I can.”

She unlocked the door and listened. Everything in the house seemed quiet. She resolved to venture. She brought the bag to the door, and with difficulty bore it downstairs. Her proceedings seemed to be altogether unnoticed—she certainly did move very quietly. Very quietly she also turned the street-door handle; as quietly she shut the door behind her. She was in the street. A taxi-cab was coming round the corner of the square. She hailed it.

CHAPTER V

ON THE CLIFF

THE Isle of Wight—the cliff between Shanklin and the Landslip; than which there cannot be a much pleasanter place on a fine July afternoon. In one of the grassy hollows in the undulating ground, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Luccombe Chine, was a lady taking her ease, pretending to read—Molly. She was dressed in black as if in mourning, her attire was in keeping neither with the scene nor the weather. All about her was a feast of colour; blue skies above her; on one side a sea of many hues; all about her grass, trees, shrubs, flowers, in all their summer radiance. Her book lay open, cover uppermost, on her knee. All at once, with an impatient gesture, she snatched it up and rose. She was ascending the slope when a man passed on the higher ground above. When he saw her, he stopped and stared, as she did when she saw him. Which seemed the more surprised it would not have been easy to say.

“Molly!” he exclaimed. In his amazement the name broke from him before he had observed the ordinary decencies by taking off his hat.

“Harry,” she said; but while he spoke with a

clearness and distinctness which must have been audible for yards around, her faint utterance could scarcely have reached him.

It was, perhaps, a sign that he was regaining his presence of mind that he removed his straw hat and stood bareheaded before her in the sun. He was quite a young man, perhaps under thirty, with a skin which seemed to have been tanned brick-red by exposure to the weather. In other respects, he was quite commonplace in his looks—and in these out-of-door days even a tanned skin is commonplace enough; but had he been some fearful and amazing vision, the girl could scarcely have seemed more impressed by the sight. So affected was she, indeed, that she stumbled rather than walked back the four or five paces she had ascended, and on reaching the bottom sank in a half kneeling, half sitting posture on the grass, as if, for the moment at least, her legs declined to sustain her.

Harry felt, although he did not show it to anything like the same extent, that he was almost as much moved as she was; he seemed to be one of those self-controlled persons who can endure unspeakable agony without showing any outward sign of it. But his silence was expressive; the look which came into his eyes as he gazed down at her, the impulse he clearly had when she sank on to the grass to rush to her assistance, an acute observer would have guessed that the effort which this young man had to put forth to enable him to retain his immobility

was a great one—so great that for some moments it practically deprived him of his power of speech.

As is not perhaps unusual in such cases, the young woman was the first to recover the use of her tongue. She said as she scrambled to her feet :

“You so startled me that I almost fell.”

When he spoke it was to ask a question.

“Are you spending your honeymoon here ?”

His inquiry sent her cheeks flaming red—as it it disconcerted her more even than the first sight of him had done.

“No, I am not.”

She spoke with a catch in her voice, as if under the stress of great emotion. He seemed to be wondering what it was that moved her so.

“I beg your pardon if I have said anything I ought not to have said.”

“You have not—it's only my silliness. As you used to say, perhaps I'm a little under the weather.”

“What has happened ?”

His glance travelled over her figure with a significance she understood.

“I'm in mourning.”

“So I can see. For whom ?”

“For my husband.”

“Your——” He began a sentence, but left it unfinished. Evidently what she said was beyond his comprehension; he was trying to puzzle it out. “I saw your mother the other day at Aix-les-Bains, and she said nothing about it. I don't understand.”

"My mother would not be likely to say anything. I've not lost my husband in the sense you perhaps think ; these are not weeds. I'm not a widow ; he's not dead—he's only dead to me."

He was still plainly groping about for her meaning.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"You haven't heard ?"

Her wish was to avoid making, if possible, what could only be a painful explanation. She was tingling with the thought of how shamed she would be in his eyes. He said nothing to help her.

"I only heard that you were married. I asked your mother how you were, and she said that you were very well. That was practically all we had to say to each other."

"I doubt if my mother even knows where I am, so she takes my being well very much for granted."

He seemed to be considering this fresh statement, and to find it as perplexing as the others.

"If I am intruding, I am very sorry—if I seem to be prying into something which you would keep from me. Would you rather that I went away ?"

"You are not intruding, nor are you prying ; only—I find it rather difficult to explain. My husband has left me—that's all."

Still his countenance showed that, so far as he was concerned, she spoke in riddles.

"What do you mean by your husband has left you ? You speak as if something strange had hap-

pened, which you take it for granted I know. Let me assure you that I know nothing, except that you are married."

"I'm not really married, except, I am told, in the legal sense. I am only a wife in name—and, I believe, in the eyes of the law. My husband went with me in the motor from the church to the hotel in which the reception was held, and there he left me. I have not seen or heard of him since, nor, so far as I know, has anyone else."

By degrees the tale was told, haltingly; as she could hardly help but tell it. As he listened his amazement clearly grew; and not his amazement only.

"Do you mean to tell me," he demanded, "that you are here alone, and that no one knows your whereabouts?"

"I am perfectly all right; I am staying with a lady who was once my governess. That's a great many years ago, when I was quite a little child, and I suppose she was only a nursery governess. I liked her very much, she was very kind to me, and I never ceased to correspond with her. She has given up teaching and has joined her sister in a boarding-house at Shanklin; I am one of her guests; she's as kind to me as ever she was; perhaps kinder. I came straight here when I left mamma on the night of my wedding, and I shall stay here—I don't know how long."

The pathos, the tragedy of this young girl's story so gripped the man that he could not even trust

himself to speak. It seemed incredible to him. The girl watched him with a white face and strained eyes as if she wondered what his continued silence might portend. At last he spoke.

"It's the most amazing thing I have ever heard, —and that it should have happened to you! I still don't understand. Would you mind my asking one thing, without thinking me impertinent?" He took her permission for granted. "Did you ever—care for this gentleman you married?"

"Never; I never even liked him. I have taken myself to task a good deal since, as you may believe; you cannot have a worse opinion of me than I have of myself. I can see now what an unspeakable creature I was. Then it was different. There was mamma on one hand and Mr. Waller on the other, I was like a puppet in their hands. It sounds silly. I'm not excusing myself, I'm just trying to tell you, as I've tried over and over again to tell myself, they did with me what they liked. Mr. Waller was a very strong man, in a way he was always very nice to me, much nicer than I wanted him to be; the nicer he was, the more I was afraid of him, physically, mentally, morally afraid, all three together. Wasn't I an unspeakable thing?"

"He had a way of looking at me when he wished me to do a thing which made me feel that I had to do it, as if I had no will of my own. I felt all along that he was treating me as if I were a baby, and in his hands I was. You cannot think how afraid I was of

him when I lay in bed and thought of him at night. It was a long time before I understood what his attentions—or what he meant for attentions—meant. Now that I look back I {cannot imagine how I can have been so stupid. When he asked me to be his wife, I was so startled, so frightened, that I really believe he felt for me. He laughed—he had the most curious laugh ; it always made me shiver. He told me not to look as if I thought he was going to kill me, and that I needn't bother about giving him an answer then if I didn't want to. I couldn't have answered him then for anything in the world ; when he left me I had a sort of fit. For the first time in my life I fainted. He must have gone straight off and told mamma what he had said to me ; and—you don't know how strange it seemed. She took it for granted that of course I was going to marry him. I tried to tell her about you. She only laughed, and wouldn't even listen. It was dreadful."

At the mere memory of it the girl was so moved that for the moment her power of speech seemed to fail her. The man was also still, as if the pity of it held him dumb. Presently she faltered :

"Harry, can you ever forgive me ?"

"If you only knew how I love you."

That was all he said, but it was enough ; the fashion of her countenance changed, colour came into her cheeks and light into her eyes. She uttered only one word, so softly that it only travelled from her to him.

“Still ?”

“Still.” Then he added : “I did not know until now how much I do love you.”

Her face was lit with what was very like the shadow of a smile.

“Thank you ; you have no idea, Harry, how much better you have made me feel. Now I think that I had better go. Miss Whiting will be wondering what has become of me, she will be waiting tea.”

“Can’t I walk home with you?”

“I think you had better not, if you don’t mind. I have so many things of which to think, and I can think so much better when I’m alone. Where are you staying, and for how long ?”

“I’m at Ventnor, at an hotel there—for how long I don’t know. I am rather at a loose end. I keep on looking for ways of making a fortune, but I can’t find one.”

“Why did you leave Africa ? I thought you were doing so well there.”

“So I was, in a way ; when I had your letter I couldn’t have stayed—not for all the wealth that Africa contains. Besides, money was not so essential to me then ; my desire for it had gone.” She looked at him with eyes which told him that she knew what he meant. “Shall I see nothing of you while I am here ?”

“I hope so, if you are staying any time. If I speak to Miss Whiting perhaps she’ll ask you to come to tea one afternoon.”

"I shall be very much obliged to Miss Whiting and I shall certainly come. But what I meant was, can't I be any help to you?"

"What help can you be?"

"You are not, I gather, particularly anxious to discover the whereabouts of Mr. Waller?"

"That is the chief thing of which I am afraid—I don't want to know where he is?"

"You realise that if his desertion continues your marriage can be pronounced invalid? If you wish to be released from him after a lapse of a certain time you can."

"So Miss Whiting tells me, but she says it will be a very long time before anything can be done—she's not sure if it's seven or fourteen years."

"I don't think that in a case like yours it can be anything like so long. I don't believe that the law can be such an ass."

"I have come to a stage at which I am capable of believing anything." This she said with so wan a smile that at the sight of it he was conscious of actual physical pain. "But I must really go. Miss Whiting will be nearly off her head. I suspect that every time I leave the house she is in fear and terror lest she should never see me again."

He lifted his hat, and without another word, strode off in the direction of the Landslip. Still in the hollow, she looked after him as he went. She had not expected him to take her so abruptly at her word; she was not sure that she altogether liked it.

It was not very civil of him to march off without even a farewell greeting, or an attempt at one. He might, at least, have asked her to name a day, though it might be only a remote one, on which he would have a chance of seeing her again—even a bare chance. She did not know his address and he did not know hers; if he did not care to know just where he was to be found, he might, at any rate, have dropped a hint of where a letter would find him if Miss Whiting did wish to ask him to tea.

In spite of the anxiety to relieve Miss Whiting's terror of which she had spoken by a prompt return to Shanklin, she did not attempt to leave the hollows till he was out of sight. By the time she did show a disposition to move, she was more than half-disposed to think that she had a grievance against this off-handed gentleman, the consideration of which would occupy her on her homeward way. But she was not to get home so quickly as she supposed. When she turned to ascend the slope, four men appeared on the edge of it above her. To her surprise they came hastening down. Before she had the least notion of what they intended they had, so to speak, hemmed her in. One of them stood quite close to her at each point of the compass so that while he stood there it was impossible for her to pass. Indeed, when she tried to pass, as she instantly did, one of them took her by the arm, and held her.

“Excuse me,” he said, “we want a word with you.”

She liked neither the man's tone nor manner, nor the appearance of his friends. Her impulse was to call for aid to the gentleman who had shown almost too much willingness to observe her wishes. The man who held her arm seemed to read what was in her thoughts.

"It's no use you calling to him," he observed, with an unpleasant significance in his tone, "he's out of sight and hearing, so don't you try. We want to have a little conversation with you in private—and we're going to have it."

CHAPTER VI

THE QUARTETTE

DESPITE her quite natural confusion, Molly retained sufficient presence of mind to realise that the four individuals who had made so sudden and unexpected an appearance on the scene were, as regards looks, about as singular and ill-matched a quartette as they well could be. The one who continued to keep her slender arm in the grip of his huge hand was, she thought, the tallest man she had ever seen. She had vague ideas of height, but she judged him to be nearly seven feet, and broad with it. She had an odd feeling that he was like a giant in a fairy tale. He had a long, red beard, a big nose, and something seemed to have destroyed the sight of one of his eyes. To attempt to break away from him, if he wished to keep her in his grasp, would be the height of absurdity. She had no doubt that he could pick her up, and tuck her under his arm, and walk off with her, without any inconvenience to himself whatever.

She endeavoured to preserve as much dignity as was possible under the circumstances as she addressed to him a request.

“Will you be so good as to loose my arm and

let go ? Who are you ? How dare you behave to me like this ? ”

But even while she spoke she was uncomfortably conscious that the effect must have been as if a tiny bantam hen were speaking to a monstrous turkey cock. It was not, however, the big man who answered her, but the gentleman with the hatchet-faced, clean-shaven cheeks and wide jaws, which, as they opened and shut, recalled to her, for some odd reason, the snapping of a rat-trap.

“ Now, if you'll keep your head, and don't try to make a fuss, and behave as prettily as you look, we won't give you any cause to complain. We know how to treat a lady, particularly when she's pretty, and all we want you to do is just to behave.”

“ Who are you ? How dare you try to keep me here ? Will you let me go ? ” she gasped, all the while conscious that it was one against four.

A third man spoke, who she felt sure had something to do with the sea. He was very fat and gross and his face was pimply. When he opened his mouth to speak she could, if she had liked, have counted all the teeth he had in it ; they were like yellow tusks.

“ We're not common scoundrels, Mrs. Waller. We're friends of John—I believe you used to call him Jack. He didn't behave to us like a friend, so we hope his wife is going to treat us better. Now, wouldn't you like, Mrs. Waller, to sit down ? There's nice soft grass to sit on, all snug here ; you

were sitting down here before that gentleman came up. We shan't keep you as long as he did, if you only will behave. Abednego, let Mrs. Waller sit down, and make herself comfortable like a lady should."

The red-bearded giant whom it seemed that the fat man had addressed as Abednego, interpreted the other's suggestion in a fashion of his own. He lifted the girl right off her feet, and all at once she found herself sitting on the grass without quite understanding how she came there. The fat man spoke to her as if she had seated herself on her own initiative.

"That's right, Mrs. Waller, that's right ; you make yourself at home, and we'll do the same. Now, boys, gather round ; seat yourselves, and show Mrs. Waller that you know how to treat a lady."

They gathered round, each in his own way. The fat man seated himself—with difficulty—on the slope, his short legs stretched out in front of him. The big man squatted by the girl, tailor fashion, towering high above her. He with the hatchet face lay on his side, propping himself up with his elbow. The fourth man, who was so diminutive as to be little more than a dwarf, and who hitherto had not opened his mouth, dropped on to his knees, blinking at the girl with his reddish coloured eyes.

"Now," continued the fat man, who seemed to be acting as chief spokesman for the party, "that we're all snug and comfortable, let's keep so. On a day like this, in a place like this, with blue skies

overhead and the sun shining, what we want is to have everything pleasant. Abednego, where's that paper?"

The big man took from an inner pocket a long blue envelope, which he passed to the speaker, who extracted from it a sheet of foolscap paper which he proceeded to unfold.

"What have we here? A simple sheet of paper, nothing more alarming, and all we want you to do, Mrs. Waller, is to put your signature at the bottom on the spot where I've got my finger. I have here a fountain pen." Speaking like a conjurer at a party he produced the article from his waistcoat pocket. "Abednego, where's that pad?" From one of his jacket pockets the huge man took a blotting-pad. "You see before you, Mrs. Waller, all the little comforts of home, so that you will be able to write just as well as if you were seated at your own pretty little desk. I know it's a pretty little desk because everything about you is bound to be pretty. Here's the pen; we place the paper on the pad, and here is the spot for you to put your name, Mrs. Waller, if you please."

He held out to her the sheet of paper placed on the blotting-pad with one hand, and in the other his fountain pen. The girl scarcely glanced at the paper; she looked at him.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "And how dare you keep me here?"

"We are old friends of your dear husband's; that, Mrs. Waller, is who we are."

“Where is he ?”

“That’s exactly the question, Mrs. Waller, which we are going to ask you. Where is dear Jack ?”

“You know perfectly well that I don’t know. I’ve not the least idea. You pretend to come from him——”

“No, no, Mrs. Waller, no. We don’t come from him, and we don’t pretend to. We don’t know where he is any more than you say you do. I give you my word that if we did we should do our talking to dear old Jack, we shouldn’t talk to you. It’s only because we don’t happen to know where he is, and can’t find out, that we want your signature.”

“What is this paper, and what do you want me to sign ?”

“It’s a mere form, Mrs. Waller, a mere form. We want your signature in a mere formal way.”

“I don’t know why you should be so particularly anxious that I should put my signature to a thing that is a mere form.”

“Exactly, Mrs. Waller, exactly. Only you see we, being old friends of your husband’s——”

“What has that to do with me ? I know nothing about Mr. Waller or his friends, and I wish to know nothing.”

“Quite right again, Mrs. Waller, quite right—beautiful to meet a young lady who knows her own mind like you do. What we’re asking you to do is to right a wrong.”

“If you want me to do anything, I’ll give you

my address at Shanklin, and you can come and talk to me about it there."

"Didn't I tell you that we wanted to have everything quite pleasant? Now don't you break the harmony. You can put your name to the paper quite as well here as you can anywhere else, so be a good little girl and sign it."

"What is on that paper? If it is the mere form you say, you would not be so anxious that I should sign it. I've had enough of signing papers blindfold, and I'll never sign another of which I know nothing."

The four men glanced at each other. The hatchet-faced man observed :

"There seems to be no reason, Augustus, why you shouldn't give her a hint or two. We want everything to be open and above-board; nothing underhand—nothing."

"No, no—nothing, nothing; everything open and above-board, as you say." Anything less suggestive of everything "open and above-board" than the fat man's manner can hardly be conceived. "Our difficulty, Mrs. Waller, is that we're so anxious not to hurt anyone's feelings, especially yours. But the fact is that, entirely between ourselves, your husband has not treated us in quite the friendly manner he might have done. What's happened to him we can't say, and you don't happen to know, so we're giving him the benefit of the doubt, and hope that if he had been spared——"

"Spared? Do you think he's dead?"

"That's the question—that's the question. Anyhow, he's gone—for the present, so we're giving him the benefit of the doubt, and hoping that if he hadn't gone he would most certainly have righted the little wrong he did us. What he calls his property, during his absence, he's handed over to you."

"Has he? I didn't know it. It's the first I've heard of it."

"*Pro tem.* he has, Mrs. Waller—*pro tem.* Your solicitor, Mr. Arthur Rye, has in his possession a power of attorney from your dear husband, authorising you to do with his property exactly what you choose. Now, this paper"—he tapped the sheet on the blotting-pad with the butt of his fountain pen—"is, we will call it, another power of attorney in which you give us the right to take steps to repay ourselves certain moneys which, in a manner of speaking, your dear husband owes us."

"Which we must have. They are our moneys, not his—we've been out of them a very long time, and for a very long time have been subjected to serious inconvenience in consequence."

This was the hatchet-faced man; the words seemed to come from him in a series of snaps. The fat man went on :

"What my friend says, Mrs. Waller, is perfectly true, only it's less than the truth. What we have had to put up with, owing to your husband keeping us out of moneys which are ours, is beyond the

power of words to describe. What we ask from you, therefore, is just an act of common, simple, everyday justice."

"If Mr. Waller has wronged you in any way, and I can do anything to put matters right, if you will communicate with Mr. Arthur Rye, of whom you have spoken, I will communicate with him also; and when he is placed in possession of all the facts I will consider them, and if I feel that I ought to, anything he advises I will do."

Again the quartette exchanged glances. The hatchet-faced man said with a grin:

"Spoken like a lawyer, Mrs. Waller; you ought to have been in the trade yourself; you seem as full of 'ifs' as the best of them."

"Your discretion, Mrs. Waller," chimed in the fat man, "does you credit—great credit. But, between friends—"

"You're no friends of mine," struck in the girl.

"Don't say that, Mrs. Waller, don't say that. You'd be in a very bad way if we weren't. Treat us as friends, and all will be well. Do justice to those who have been wrongly used, and heaven will shine on you; refuse to do justice—ah, Mrs. Waller, I'm afraid to think of what will follow. Now, you understand the situation perfectly well. We don't want to keep you a moment longer than we can help, so put your signature here."

He insinuatingly advanced towards her the foun-

tain pen, the point held close to the sheet of paper. She drew back.

"I won't," she said.

"Do, Mrs. Waller, now do, without our having to use pressure of any sort or kind."

"I will not sign anything that I don't understand. I am going home—let me pass!"

She would have risen, had not the big man, with one hand on her shoulder, kept her where she was.

"You're not going home, Mrs. Waller, until you have signed this paper, until you have done an act of simple justice; so why harden your little heart against us? Be true to your better self, and take the pen."

Instead of taking it she struck it from between his fingers, so that it travelled several feet through the air and alighted in a bush.

"You won't dare to keep me here—you won't dare! Let me go! You great coward, take your hand away and let me go!"

As the girl showed an inclination to raise her voice, the giant's disengaged hand was all at once placed before her mouth; so huge was it that it covered almost the whole of her face. Unable to speak or move, she was as helpless as an infant.

"You see," purred the fat man—there was about his whole manner something uncannily reminiscent of the purring of a dangerous cat—"how desirable it is that you should treat us as the friends we really are. All we ask is justice, and, as you know, justice must

be done, if not in one way then in another. It is so silly of you to set yourself against us. It will only make matters worse for you, and all we want is pleasantness. Now be good and fear nothing, and put your signature just here. Abednego, take your hand away from her pretty mouth—one moment first. Trotman, get me the pen. It's only natural that a pretty girl should have her little fits of temper, but we can't do without a pen." The diminutive man, who had still continued speechless, retrieved the fountain pen. The fat man went on, the pen again extended: "Now, Abednego, give the little lady the chance for which I am sure she is longing—to put her name just here. Now, Mrs. Waller."

The big man removed his hand. The girl showed how clearly the fat man had seen what was passing through her mind by screaming the moment the hand was taken away.

"Help!"

The word, short though it is, yet was not completely uttered. The hand was back again before it could be.

"Dear, dear," sighed the fat man. "Who would have dreamed that one so young and fair could be possessed of such an evil spirit, and make so much fuss about doing a little act of justice."

"I knew she wouldn't." This was the little man, his first utterance; he spoke with a sort of wheeze, as if he were broken-winded or suffered from some affection of the throat.

"You knew she wouldn't what?" the fat man inquired.

"Wouldn't do what we wanted unless we made her. I know. You thought because she was a girl you could persuade her. Girls nowadays aren't persuaded so easily; the only way to do it nowadays is to wring their necks."

"Well, if she insists we can always wring hers, can't we, Mrs. Waller?" This was the fat man. "Abednego, where is that bottle? You are our storehouse, our general emporium in which we keep everything we need." The big man handed over a white cloth, in which the fat man showed that a bottle was wrapped—what a chemist calls an eight-ounce phial. "You see this, Mrs. Waller?" He shook it before her eyes. "We came prepared for all emergencies, willing to be your friends, your true friends, or not, as you preferred. If there's no sense of justice in you we shall have to use this bottle, put some of its contents on this cloth, press it to your pretty nose and pretty mouth, and all the little sense you've got will go. Then we shall be able to do just as we like with you—you understand? You'll be one helpless little girl in the hands of four ill-used men. You'll perform that simple act of justice before we've done with you, only not so agreeably to yourself as you might have done if you had proved to be the high-minded soul we hoped you were. Now, which is to be. We are going to have the signature anyhow, with or without the bottle. One moment,

Abednego." The fat man took the bottle out of the cloth and poured quite a generous part of the contents on to the cloth. "Now, Mrs. Waller, our dear friend is going to take his hand away from your pretty little mouth ; if you open it to scream, I'll have this in it before you know what's coming, and you'll be done for. Now, Abednego."

The big man took away his hand. The girl shook her head as if she were glad to get the fresh air into her lungs without interception by that grimy palm. She said nothing ; she looked the fat man in the face, as a rabbit might regard a threatening fox from which it knows it cannot escape. It was like one large, insinuating smile.

"Now, Mrs. Waller, there's a dear, there's a high-souled English girl ; fear not to do right whate'er befall ; take this pen in your lily-white fingers and put your name just there." She did as he bade her, to the extent of taking the pen between what he called her "lily-white fingers." "That's better ; that's more in the spirit of true friendship ; just a few movements of a pen, and four wronged men will be on the road to being righted ; how much better you'll sleep with that thought in your head to-night —here, put your name just here."

He dabbed his stubby fingers on the sheet of paper. For a moment it looked as if he were going to have his way. She leaned forward with the pen held close to the paper. The fat man was all smirks and complacency.

“There!—there now! beautiful within as well as without—how noble it is to right the wrong. A few strokes of the pen just there—that’s all. Don’t hold her quite so tight, Abednego; she can’t get at it.”

Presumably the giant’s grasp was loosened. The girl sprang up, threw the fountain pen as far from her as she could, and delivered herself of at least one shriek before she could be stopped.

“Help!”

The giant had her down again in an instant, his hand before her mouth. The fat man came close to her with his soaked white cloth. His smiles had vanished.

“You cat! Abednego, let me shove this down her gullet, and then we’ll talk to her in the sweet by and by.”

Before the big man could withdraw his hand so as to permit of the other carrying out his pleasing little threat, someone hailed them from higher ground at the back.

“What’s going on down there?”

The question was asked by the young man with the tanned skin who had acceded to the girl’s request so literally that he had taken himself away without even a farewell greeting.

CHAPTER VII

BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

THERE ensued in that hollow, immediately after the appearance of that young man, an episode which was as brief as it was lively. When he put to them, in ungentle tones, that question, the quartette were taken wholly by surprise.

The big man, for an instant, let go of the girl entirely. She was quick to take advantage of the opportunity by scrambling on to her feet and calling to the young man above.

"Mr. Drummond," she exclaimed, "help! They wanted to kill me!"

There was nothing to show that they had intended to go as far as that, but the young man stopped to ask no further questions. He came rushing down the slope.

"You brutes!" he shouted. By the time he reached the bottom the four men were on their feet. Not for a second did one of them seem to lose his presence of mind; they had not improbably been taken by surprise more than once in the course of their adventurous careers. As before, the fat man acted as chief spokesman.

By the Light of the Moon 67

"You look after the girl, Abednego, we'll tackle him; what you've got to do is to keep her still."

To give an exact account of what instantly occurred would not be easy. The giant picked the girl clean off her feet; as he held her to him with his right arm, with his left hand he rendered it impossible for her to give utterance to a sound. It is not impossible that the sight of the girl being handled with such scant ceremony inflamed Mr. Drummond's ire.

"You hound!" he cried, and he made as if to leap at the giant and put an end to him. But the trio made an end of him before he got there. His attention being centred on the lady, he did not take so much heed of the others as he should have done. As he came tearing down, the hatchet-faced man caught him a swinging blow on the side of the head which bowled him over like a ninepin. When he was down, the little man, flinging himself on his chest, pinned him to the earth. And the fat man, stooping over him, pressed the soaked white scarf to his nose and mouth, and kept it there.

"That'll be enough for him," remarked the hatchet-faced man, when the soaked cloth had been held there several seconds, "he won't want any more."

Withdrawing the cloth, bringing himself upright, the fat man observed him.

"I don't think he will. I really don't think he

Molly's Husband

will. I think that one you gave him, Samuel, would have been about enough for him without any help from me. What a deal of fuss one small girl can cause, even when there's every wish to be pleasant. Now, what are we going to do ? "

"I think we'd better go."

"Perhaps we had, Samuel ; wonderful how often right you are ! With the little lady ? "

"If you'd taken my advice you'd have broken her neck to start with."

This was the little man. The fat one looked at him with his gross, pimply face all beaming.

"Your reasoning is sound as far as it goes, Trotman ; it always is ; but doesn't it strike you that we shouldn't have been much farther on if we had broken her neck ? What we have to consider is business, not pleasure."

The hatchet-faced man spoke in lowered tones, his head on one side in an attitude of listening.

"We'd better step it."

"With the little lady ? "

"Hang the little lady ! Clap that wad of yours upon her mouth. Lay her on the grass beside this cock bird, and leave her there. We can deal with her another time, if she must be dealt with."

"Here, Abednego." The fat man went up to the giant. "Let me get at her face with this ; let me put a few drops more on it first, lest the gentleman should have taken all the virtue out of it." He emptied some more of the contents

of the bottle on to the cloth. "Now, then, let's have a look at her pretty lips; this will stop her screeching."

The giant took his hand away from the girl's mouth; at that same instant the fat man put the wet cloth there instead, pressing it against her face, as it seemed, with all his might. The fragile form shivered as with a sort of convulsion; then lay limp on the giant's arm.

"That's done for her." The fat man smiled. "Lay her down beside the other." The giant laid her on the grass, within a foot of the young man. The fat man picked up the sheet of paper, folded it carefully, and put it back into the envelope. "A pity we didn't get her signature; if we were in a decent country we'd get it yet before we left her, but in a place like this it might cost us more than it's worth, and it would be worth a trifle too. As Samuel says, we may have a chance of dealing with her a little later on; we'll be able to make one with a little management. Then Trotman might be able to give himself the pleasure of breaking her neck. What's the matter with you, Samuel?"

"If no one's coming this way, they're walking along the path, and I'm going to take no chances."

In less than six seconds the hollow was deserted, save for the two silent forms lying on the grass. The four gallant gentlemen disappeared, showing more discretion, as it turned out, than the circumstances actually required. The hatchet-faced man had been,

perhaps, a trifle nervous. He might have heard someone moving along the path ; but the sun sank, the shadows gathered, the summer night came on, and still no one came near the hollow. There was a moon that night, but she was late in rising ; yet she was high up in the sky, shedding her radiance on the myriad stars which gleamed in the unclouded heavens, before either of the twain gave signs of life.

Then it was the girl who moved. Her body began to twitch ; a shudder passed all over it ; she gasped as if for breath—and thereupon sat up. She evidently did not realise where she was. She felt the faint night breeze which penetrated even to the bottom of that hollow, and, putting down her ungloved hands on either side of her, became aware that the grass was wet with dew. Startled, she looked about her ; in the moonlight it was not dark ; then she dimly understood. As she began to scramble to her feet, she touched something which was close beside her ; in her surprise she gave utterance to what seemed to be an involuntary little scream. Drawing back, she remained rigid, and looked. Then she saw that close to where she had been lying was a man who lay curiously still. When, after several seconds' intent observation, she saw how motionless he remained she gained courage. She leaned towards him and looked down at his face—and she saw who it was ; and began to understand a little more clearly. She put up her hands to her brows, which were aching

and throbbing as she had never known them do before.

“It’s Harry! Oh, I remember! Those dreadful men! Harry!”

She spoke to him softly, as if she were afraid of being overheard; but her voice was not even audible to him. She leaned towards him again, and touched him on the arm.

“Harry.” Still he paid no heed. She leaned over him still farther, so that there were but a few inches between their faces. All at once she was taken with a great fear: “If he is dead!”

Clearly she was at a loss what to do. She eyed him still for a few seconds; then stood up and stared about her. Gradually she remembered where she was, all about it, hazily, like a dream coming back to her. It was queer how strange she felt, how giddy, what an unpleasant taste was in her mouth, how her head was throbbing. She ascended the slope—she reeled when she moved; her feet did not seem to belong to her, when she put them down they seemed to slide from under her. It seemed to be quite a journey to the top of the hollow. She had not gained much when she got there. Not a creature was in sight; all the world was sleeping. She wondered vaguely what time it could be, she remembered that she used to have a watch in a strap about her wrist; she looked at her wrist, the watch was still there—it was nearly two o’clock.

"Can it be two in the morning?" she asked herself. "What will Miss Whiting think has become of me?"

Then she looked down the slope towards the bottom of the hollow. How still he continued to lie. What was she to do? She could do nothing for him herself; she was so stupid, she knew so little—what could she do? If she were to go for help, where was she to find it? Somewhere thereabouts, she had a misty notion, there was a cottage at which they dispensed tea to visitors. In the blurred condition of her mental faculties she could not think whereabouts it was. Her brain seemed fogged, she could think of nothing clearly, she could not even decide in which direction Shanklin lay. If she left that hollow, she might not find it again. In her present stupid state she would almost certainly be lost. What good would come to him from that?

As she stood there, endeavouring in her bewilderment to form some plan of action, unwittingly she herself became an object of acute interest to two gentlemen who had come up from the beach by way of Luccombe Chine. One was the fat, pimply-faced man who had been responsible in the afternoon for what had happened both to her and to Mr. Drummond. The other was Abednego, the red-bearded giant. The fat man had said to him as they came up the Chine: "If she's not at home, and they know nothing about her, which it seems they don't from the fuss they're making, it only stands to reason

that the odds are that she's still where we left her. That stuff's pretty pungent; I've known parties keep under its influence for twelve hours or more. If she is still there, I don't see why we shouldn't do our little business with her yet, even if we have to carry her down, put her in a boat, and take her for a little trip. We've got a boat down below, haven't we? Very well, then, and isn't Samuel and Trotman in charge of it? There will be no difficulty whatever. You can carry her down, can't you?"

"Yes, I can carry her down; she weighs nothing."

"I wish I didn't weigh so much, because then you could have carried me up."

The path up Luccombe Chine is steep. The fat man was not built for climbing. He had to pause two or three times on the way up. At the top he sank on the ground and gasped for breath.

"If it turns out that she has gone," he observed as he mopped his face and forehead, "I've run a great risk for nothing, because I've reason to believe that my heart isn't what it used to be, and bursting my bellows like this isn't good for it."

When the fat man deemed himself to have sufficiently recovered, they proceeded. They had gone perhaps another hundred yards when the big man caught his companion by the arm.

"There she is." He pointed to where, on the top of a slope, another hundred yards or so from where they were, a feminine figure was outlined against the moonlit sky.

"It looks as if she'd just come to, and is wondering where she is; well, she may wonder. I suppose that interfering gentleman is still where we left him; he can hardly have come to and gone away and left her all alone, after the hurry he was in to interfere in what wasn't any business of his. The thing we've got to consider, Abednego, is not to let her see us."

The fashion in which they took advantage of every scrap of cover in their desire to approach the girl unnoticed suggested that that was not the first time that they had been engaged on a similar adventure; even the fat man moved with a rapidity of which, especially after the efforts he had made in ascending the Chine, one would hardly have deemed him capable.

"If I only could think," the girl told herself, pressing her hands to her temples, within which there seemed to be something which was doing its best to burst them. "If only I didn't feel so silly! What shall I do? Oh!"

The monosyllable represented a sudden ejaculation.

Two figures seemed to rise from the solid ground and spring at her. She found herself held in a grip in which she was powerless even to struggle. A voice addressed her which she seemed to have heard before.

"So, Mrs. Waller, we've met again. This is a pleasure on which this afternoon I did not consider

By the Light of the Moon 75

myself entitled to reckon. You remember us—especially me?"

She did, with a consciousness of a sudden, awful terror, which made her feel as if life were slipping away. The fat man went on; there was something in his manner, in the way in which he eyed her, in his oily tones, in the pleasure which he evidently derived from the sight of her distress, which was indescribably sinister.

"I've still got the paper, Mrs. Waller, and the pen. If you feel like putting your signature where I asked you to put it this afternoon—now's your chance. Providence has been good to you in giving you another. I hope this time you'll show that you appreciate your blessings. Before I get the paper out and the pen, perhaps you'll be so good as to say if you're willing to sign or if you're not. You're alone with us out here. It would be no more trouble for us to wring your neck and break your back into little pieces than if you were a chicken. I only say that, wishing to be agreeable, as is becoming in one of Jack Waller's oldest friends. So how is it going to be? Are you going to sign, or are you not?"

"I don't think," said Abednego, "it's much use for you to talk to her—she's fainted."

She had; merciful unconsciousness had made his threat inaudible.

"Then we shall have to carry her to the boat. She'll be sorry when she finds herself there. There's our gentleman; I'll just go and have a look how he's

getting on." The fat man descended to where the recumbent figure still lay motionless. "I did give him a dose—a good one." One felt from the speaker's tone that he was smiling. "If he's got a heart like I have, I shouldn't wonder if it had killed him; he just lies as if he were dead." With the toe of his boot, the fat man pushed the silent figure over on to its side and then back again. "He wouldn't like that if he knew what I was doing. A very hot temper he seemed to have. Hallo! What's that?"

Abednego answered, standing on the higher ground with the unconscious girl in his arms.

"Sounds like people's voices, and as if they were coming this way."

The fat man hurried up, looking in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

"I shouldn't wonder if it's a search party looking for her, owing to the fuss they're making in that place in which she lives. I wondered if they'd be up to any foolishness of this kind. Abednego, there's quite a lot of them; more interference with decent men—this is a hard world we live in."

"Hadn't we better go?"

"Yes, Abednego, I think we had; and perhaps we hadn't better take the little lady with us."

"Why not? I can carry her; she's no weight. They'll not catch us."

"Perhaps not. But suppose there's another lot of them down below, waiting for us at the bottom

of the path? I shouldn't wonder if they were doing this search party properly; one party going along the cliffs, and another along the shore. We don't want to have any trouble explaining to them how she comes to be in your arms, and you don't want to have to throw her from you when you're about half way down to save yourself from an explanation. Put her back into the hollow, Abednego, and we'll go off by ourselves. We shall be able to do our business with her a little later; I always shall believe that in the long run Heaven helps them that helps themselves."

The girl was laid down again upon the grass, and the pair sped off. Scarcely had they gone than her consciousness returned, perhaps the change of position, or the feel of the wet grass against her cheek, had something to do with it. She sat up. A strange thing happened. Even as she was in the act of sitting up, consciousness returned to the man at her side. With a start he sat up also. He stared at her.

"Molly!" he exclaimed.

"Harry!" she cried. Perhaps it was because, in her distress and bewilderment, she did not really know what she was doing, that she went fluttering close up to him, so close that she could not have got any closer. "I thought that you were dead."

He had his arm about her, when presently they became aware that the silence was being disturbed by voices which were calling.

"Hallo! Hallo! Mrs. Waller! Hallo!"

As she listened, all at once it was borne in on her what was the meaning of the sudden clamour.

"They are calling my name. I do believe they've come to look for me."

CHAPTER VIII

REPRESENTING MRS. WALLER

MR. ARTHUR RYE, the senior partner in the firm of Messrs. Rye and Dunster, was in his private room in the London offices of the firm in Great Marlborough Street. On a chair at the other side of the table at which he sat was a young gentleman whose skin had been tanned very brown by exposure to climatic conditions of all sorts and kinds. Mr. Rye was holding an open letter in his hand.

“I see from this, Mr. Drummond, that you come as an ambassador from our client, Mrs. Waller, who requests us to answer, if possible, any questions you may ask, and supply you with any information you may require. But why did the lady not come to us, or at least communicate with us, herself? This letter is the first intimation we have had of the part of the world in which she is to be found. I see that the address on the letter is ‘The White Cottage,’ Shanklin, Isle of Wight. Is that where she is residing?”

“It is; she went there on the day after she was married, and she has been there ever since.”

"You are intimately acquainted with her movements, Mr. Drummond?"

"I only learnt that she was at Shanklin by accident. She is in the house of an old governess of hers. I think her wish was to be alone in some place where she could think matters out for herself without the risk of extraneous interference."

"I see; not an unreasonable wish for her to have. I wonder, Mr. Drummond, to what extent you are in her confidence. Would it be indelicate of me to ask you if you know how much money she has—ready money? Her mother is under the impression that when she left Eccleston Square, in that unexpected fashion, she had only a shilling or two in her pocket."

"Lady Mitford is mistaken. She had a sum of money which was given her by her mother's cousin, Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux, as a wedding present. It was not a large sum, but, living as she is doing, it will suffice her for some time to come."

"I see. Then she has not drawn upon her banker?"

"You mean upon the amount which Mr. Waller deposited in her name? She has not."

"She does not mind spending the money which Mr. Prideaux gave her on the occasion of her wedding, which a purist might think was given to her under what amounts to a misapprehension; but she objects to touching the money which her husband gave her, and to which she certainly is entitled."

Representing Mrs. Waller 81

Mr. Drummond was silent. "She does not say in her letter that she has heard anything of her husband—has she?"

"Nothing. That is one of the questions which I wish to put to you. Have you heard anything?"

Mr. Rye leaned back in his chair, pressed the tips of his fingers together, and smiled.

"If you wish me to answer yes or no, I say no, nothing. But if you wish me to be more discursive, as I presume you do, I hardly know what to say. I have seen nothing of Mr. Waller, I have heard nothing from him, directly; yet—. Perhaps I had better put it this way. Our offices, Mr. Drummond, have been, I may almost say, haunted by some very singular characters, who, I suspect, are in communication with him, and, in a sense, his emissaries."

"You think that Mr. Waller is still alive?"

"I have no reason whatever to think that he is dead; have you? Has your wife?"

Ignoring the solicitor's questions, the visitor continued to put questions of his own.

"Do you think he has been kidnapped?"

"Why kidnapped?"

"That's a question, Mr. Rye, if you will excuse my pressing it, to which I should rather like you to answer yes or no."

"There are questions, Mr. Drummond, to which, as you must be aware, it is not easy to answer simply yes or no. I may tell you that, a few days ago, a cheque, purporting to be signed by him, was

presented across the counter at one of the banks at which he has an account—I dare say you know that he has accounts at several—for one thousand pounds—an open cheque, to order. The cashier paid it. He was, and still is, quite certain of the genuineness of the signature. The bank authorities did not feel justified in refusing to honour a client's cheque, merely because he chose to leave his bride, practically, at the church door. They did ask the man who presented it where he got it from. He told them brusquely that he did not quite see what business it was of theirs, but that, if they were anxious to know, he did not mind telling them that he got it from Mr. Waller himself."

"What kind of a person was he?"

"Somewhere in the thirties, medium height, freckles, blue eyes, and a fair moustache; he wore a brown tweed suit and a soft grey felt hat, and he spoke with a slight American accent. They seem to have observed him pretty closely. When the cashier asked him at what address Mr. Waller might be found, he wasn't over civil; he wanted to know what the something business it was of theirs. He presumed that if Mr. Waller wanted them to know what his address was, Mr. Waller himself would tell them; which of course was true enough. A man may have reasons, and not uncommonly, sometimes, does have reasons, for wishing to withhold his whereabouts even from his banker. They gave him the money in twenty-pound notes."

"Did they follow him?"

"They thought of doing so, but there was no one handy. I doubt if much would have been gained if they had. I have just learnt that another cheque for a thousand pounds was presented yesterday at another of Mr. Waller's banks. This time the person who presented it was asked for his name and address, which he quite willingly gave. Here it is." Mr. Rye took a slip of paper from the table. "'David Mackenzie, 39, Randolph Buildings, Gray's Inn.'"

"Has its authenticity been inquired into?"

"It has, and it is perfectly authentic. I may mention that the day after Mr. Waller's wedding, and his disappearance, we received a document, purporting to be a power of attorney, authorising his wife to sign cheques in his name, and deal generally with his various properties exactly as she chose. It was drawn up in proper legal form, and certified by two witnesses, of whom David Mackenzie, 39, Randolph Buildings, was one. There is on the law list a solicitor whose name is David Mackenzie at that address. I went round, personally, to interview him. He seemed quite a respectable person and informed me that he had known Mr. John Waller for many years. Mackenzie is a man somewhere in the fifties, and has been an admitted solicitor for over twenty years. As you are possibly aware, Mr. Waller was married on Tuesday, June 20th. Mr. Mackenzie informed me that late on that day Mr. Waller came to see him at his office, and requested him to draw up

then and there the document we had received. It was drawn up then and there, Mr. Mackenzie was one witness and his chief clerk was the other. Mr. Mackenzie made no bones about giving me so much information, but at that point he became reticent. When I pointed out to him that it was rather curious that Mr. Waller should have left his wife practically at the church door and gone straight to him on such an errand, as he must have done, he merely looked at me and said nothing. When I asked him certain questions, he observed that he had received no instructions to answer them, and he didn't. When I handed to him a communication which I had prepared, and requested him to forward it to his client, he told me that he had not even been instructed to do that, and handed it back to me. I got nothing out of him at all."

"Do you think he knows where Waller is?"

"I can't tell you. A clerk of ours went with a paying clerk from the bank to call on him this morning. The bank man recognised him as the person who had presented the cheque, but when they began to ask questions, the pair of them were shown to the door. We cannot force a solicitor to violate the confidence a client has placed in him, if he does not see his way to doing so. I may remark that if Mr. Mackenzie does or does not know where Waller is, there seem to be a good many people, apart from those we represent, who do not, and would very much like to. We have reason to believe that this office

is under constant observation. There have been attempts to tamper with postmen, to get a glimpse of our correspondence, apparently with a view to seeing if we are in receipt of letters which come from him. Come to this window."

Mr. Rye led Mr. Drummond to a window which looked out on to the street.

" You see that man standing at the corner there, with his hands in his pockets and a cigar in his mouth —he is there every day during office hours, keeping an eye on our front door. We called the attention of the police to him. When an officer from Scotland Yard asked him what he meant by loitering there in that suspicious and persistent manner, he informed the questioner that he had reason to believe that Mr. John Waller intended shortly to pay a call at our offices, and that he proposed to remain there on watch till Mr. Waller came. What were we to do ? We should gain nothing by prosecuting him, even if we had a definite charge to make."

" Have you tried to speak to him yourself ? "

" We have invited him to pay us a call. He told our clerk that he had not the pleasure of our acquaintance, and did not wish to have it. We pressed the matter no farther. We have no objection to his fondness for this particular part of Great Marlborough Street."

" When he goes away, you might have him watched in his turn ; perhaps you would gain something from that."

"We did. We instructed a private detective to see where he went. He made no attempt to throw him off the scent ; when he left Great Marlborough Street he strolled leisurely to an hotel in the Strand, where they informed our man that he had been residing since June 20th—the day of the wedding, you observe—that he received no letters and had no visitors, and that, beyond the fact that he paid his bills regularly, they knew nothing about him. We gained nothing by that ; he is still there. You might tackle him as you go out, and see what you can gain."

"You say you have had persons calling and inquiring about Mr. Waller ?"

"Several. About a fortnight ago one made quite a scene—a big, black-bearded man. He told us he believed we knew where Mr. Waller was, and that he had a mind to take us each and severally by the throat and choke the truth out of us. I believe he would have liked to have a try at doing it, too."

There was a brief silence, during which Mr. Drummond appeared to be examining the toes of his boots.

"What conclusions, Mr. Rye, do you draw from all this ?"

"Speaking without prejudice, as we lawyers say, it would seem that Mr. Waller had sound reasons of his own for wishing to keep in the background. That is the only conclusion that I can draw, and that is merely surmise."

"What is known about him?"

"You mean as regards his history? Precious little. So far as we can ascertain, the first thing that was heard of him was that somewhere at the beginning of this year large sums in cash were paid into various London banks in his name, and many valuable securities were placed there on deposit."

"They had references with him?"

"I can't tell you. Banks are no more compelled to reveal the affairs of their customers than solicitors."

"He has got money?"

"Plenty. In one London bank alone he has standing to his credit, in cash and securities, close on a hundred thousand pounds. That's at one place only; the man is immensely rich. As Mrs. Waller's representative, I don't mind telling you that, as mining engineers put it, he has 'in plain sight' probably rather over than under a million sterling; we have reasons to—shall I say suspect?—that he has resources of which we have no actual knowledge to a fabulous amount. Where he got his money from is another story; it is possible that that's the trouble."

"You mean that he got it in more or less nefarious ways?"

"If you could induce that man on the other side of the street I pointed out to you, to be quite candid, it is just possible that he might be able to throw more light on the subject than I can."

"Of course you realise what an incredible position Mrs. Waller is in."

"There are alleviating circumstances, Mr. Drummond."

"I see none."

"Some men would see a good many; I do, for one."

"She is married and single; a widow with a husband living; rich and yet a pauper; an innocent girl living in constant danger of being punished for her husband's crimes."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Drummond? In what sense do you use the word 'punished'?"

The young man told of the girl's adventure with the four men on the Shanklin cliffs. Mr. Rye looked grave.

"This is the first I've heard of it; how comes it that such an outrage did not find its way into the papers? Has nothing been done to discover the miscreants?"

"What could be done? Mrs. Waller would suffer almost anything rather than be dragged in such a matter into a police court. My own conviction is that the man Waller is a scoundrel of the very worst type; that he fully deserves to be made to suffer for his crimes, and that those four persons were more or less uneducated men whom he had victimised, and who resorted to the only means which they thought were in their power to get back their own again. I have not the slightest doubt that Waller has been

guilty of a large number of offences, and that he is in hiding to save himself from the vengeance of those whom he has injured."

"You speak with warmth. You are an old friend of Mrs. Waller's?"

"I hoped at one time to make her my wife."

The young man looked the lawyer very straight in the face; his expression was very stern.

"I see. Now I begin to understand."

"Except in the eyes of the law, Mr. Rye, this unfortunate girl—she is still scarcely more than a child—is not that man's wife and never will be. Is the law so monstrously unjust that it will refuse, if asked, to pronounce the marriage invalid?"

"Do you mean that if Mrs. Waller were to go to the courts to-day? I should say most emphatically that it would not be so pronounced."

"How long will this state of things have to continue before she can get justice?"

"You are asking me for legal advice, Mr. Drummond. I did not gather that you had come to me for that. Are you speaking on Mrs. Waller's behalf, or on your own?"

The young man flushed. There was suggestion in the lawyer's tone.

"If you decline to give me the information, I can get it elsewhere."

"That is so, no doubt. It's like this, Mr. Drummond; if Mr. Waller's desertion continues, after the lapse of a certain time she could undoubtedly obtain a decree

of nullity. Exactly how long that period would be, under the circumstances, I should not care to say—I couldn't say. But this I may remark: several years would have to pass before anything of that sort could be done."

The young man stood up.

"Thank you, Mr. Rye. I do not think I need detain you longer. I have, perhaps, already trespassed too much upon your time."

"Not at all, Mr. Drummond, not at all. Mrs. Waller is, after all and before all else, our client. If I came over to Shanklin do you not think she would see me if I left her to make her own appointment?"

"That I cannot say. I know she wishes to avoid having personal dealings with anyone who is associated in her mind with Mr. Waller."

"But we are not associated with Mr. Waller. We represent her mother."

"Exactly; you represent her mother. Lady Mitford has behaved as no decent woman could behave, and as it is almost incredible that the most unmotherly mother could behave to a child. No, Mr. Rye, you will not prepossess Mrs. Waller in your favour by telling her that you represent her mother."

"Very well, then, we represent her."

"That is what she wonders."

"You have no right, from any point of view, to throw out such an injurious hint."

"I wish you good-day, Mr. Rye."

"One moment, if you please. I don't wish you to leave us under an erroneous impression. Our sympathies—my sympathies and my partner's sympathies—are with Mrs. Waller. We are quite conscious of how badly she has been treated—we will do all for her that is in our power. And you will do her, and us, an injury if you convey to her, by open assertion or by innuendo, the impression that on every possible ground, and in every possible sense, we have not her interests at heart."

"I am very glad, Mr. Rye, to learn that that is the case. Once more—good-day."

That time the visitor went. He could scarcely have quitted the precincts of the office when Mr. Dunster, the junior partner, entered the senior's room.

"Rye, who is that who has been keeping you all this time?"

"That is Harry Drummond, the son of the man who was the resident in one of the Indian States—wasn't it Malapure? He is the young fellow who, Lady Mitford once gave me a hint, was dangling about her girl, and of whom she disapproved because of his shortness of cash. If he could he would marry her to-morrow."

"Who—Lady Mitford?"

"No, man, her girl. He is extremely anxious to have her marriage with Waller broken. If he isn't very discreet and keeps himself carefully in hand he'll make that a much more difficult job than he

imagines. If she is a wise young woman she'll keep at least a hundred miles between herself and him."

There was not a hundred miles between them that night. Mr. Drummond went straight back to Shanklin and called at the White Cottage soon after his arrival. The door was opened by the lady of the house herself. She ushered him into the sitting-room with a face which was pregnant with meaning. Directly she had shut the door, she said, in a whisper, as if she were fearful of being overheard :

"Oh, Mr. Drummond, such a fearful thing has happened—that poor—poor child!"

Before Mr. Drummond had a chance to ask him what he meant, Mrs. Waller entered. The look on her face was as significant as that on the elder woman's.

"Harry, look what the postman's brought to-day."

He took what she was holding out to him. It was some seconds before he realised what it was ; then he perceived that it was a miniature of herself painted on ivory ; but it was so smeared on both sides with blood that scarcely any of the features were visible.

"That is a picture of me which Mr. Waller always carried in his pocket, in this case." She held in her tremulous fingers a thin, leather case, which was stiff with what seemed to be dried blood.

Representing Mrs. Waller 93

"There was nothing else in the envelope in which it came but this slip of paper."

He saw that on it five words had been type-written :

"A relic of the dead."

CHAPTER IX

ON THE BOAT

“DEAR Miss Jane, it’s not the slightest use discussing the matter farther ; my mind is made up. There’s nothing else for me to do, so I must do the only thing I can, and that is—accept Mrs. Norris’s offer and do as she suggests—go to Leicester and commence my duties next Monday.”

“But, my dear Molly,” observed Miss Jane Whiting timidly, “the post is such a poor one, the duties required almost suggest a menial, the salary is so small. What is fifteen pounds a year for a nursery governess ? Even I used to have more than that.”

“But your qualifications were miles in front of mine.” Miss Jane Whiting shook her head.

“I’m not so sure of that. Beyond the rudiments, I never professed to know anything.”

“Your music, Jane, was distinctly good—quite exceptional. I distinctly remember that in mentioning your qualifications when applying for posts, you always underlined ‘Music good.’ I never heard anyone play ‘Silvery Waves’ better than you do. I must have heard you play it hundreds of times, and never without enjoyment.”

This was Miss Ellen Whiting, the elder sister.

Seated in what was regarded as her own arm-chair, re-footing a black woollen stocking, she acted the part of chorus. Another momentous moment had arrived in Mrs. Waller's eventful life ; she had decided to do something, as she put it, to earn her own living. That wedding present of Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux had not all gone; to wait for that to happen before commencing her career as a wage-earner would, she declared, be almost wicked. She had to look ahead ; the sooner she started work the better. The remainder of that wedding present would serve as a nest-egg for a rainy day.

Miss Jane Whiting had, among her other experiences as a teacher, once acted as a governess in the family of Mr. Thomas Norris, of Leicester. Cecilia Norris—Miss Norris—had been her last pupil. That young lady was now supposed to be grown up, but her younger sister, Agatha, was still in the days of her pupilage. Mrs. Norris objected to schools of any sort for her girls ; she always had a governess. She still occasionally corresponded with Miss Jane Whiting, who had the knack of keeping on good terms with the families of nearly all her old pupils. In one of her letters Mrs. Norris had mentioned that Agatha's present governess was leaving, and did Miss Jane Whiting know of another ? Mrs. Waller, who was present at the breakfast table when this epistle arrived—she took all her meals with her two landladies—at once begged Miss Jane to mention her as a candidate for the post.

Considerably against her will, Miss Jane Whiting had done so ; correspondence had ensued, and now had come a letter formally offering Miss Mitford the post of nursery governess to Miss Agatha Norris, turned eight. This offer Mrs. Waller, who had resumed for Mrs. Norris's benefit her maiden name of Mitford, was bent on accepting. Miss Ellen Whiting was neutral. It was her habit, as she herself asserted, always to look on both sides of any question ; and never, as a result, to express a positive opinion on either. She admitted that the position offered was not in all respects as inviting as it might have been. Its fortunate holder would apparently have to act as nurse as well as governess to Miss Agatha Norris ; she would have to superintend her going to bed and her getting up, to keep her eye on her wardrobe, and, in short, to be her constant companion from early morn to dewy eve—and often considerably later. If on the face of it the duties were heavy the salary was light—fifteen pounds a year and “reasonable laundry.” But as Miss Ellen pointed out, the competition for such posts was enormous. Mrs. Norris herself hinted that the applications she had received were so many as to be really annoying. Molly, as Miss Ellen pointed out, was very young, without experience, and her own education did not go beyond a certain point. Of these facts Molly herself was almost painfully conscious.

“When you come to the point,” she protested, “I really can teach scarcely anything. To read and

to write, and to do simple sums—I never am quite sure if I'm right when I've added up a bill, especially if it's a long one—very plain sewing, and quite easy pieces on the piano. I might teach history and geography with a book in front of me, but I'm quite sure that I couldn't without—and that's all."

"There's French," said Miss Jane. "Your French is most fluent. I am sure it is much better than mine."

"My French!" Molly laughed. "I can ask for things in shops—some things—and I can say a few words to a waiter, and I have tried to take part in a general conversation, and failed, but I know no grammar, and if I could write a simple note, I shouldn't know how to spell the words. No, my dear, I'm not worth more than fifteen pounds a year as a governess, I'm sure of that."

"But you can't live on fifteen pounds a year, to say nothing of dress."

"Mrs. Norris will give me my board and lodging, and in the holidays I can come to you. As for dress, I've always understood that the plainer a governess's clothes are the more her employers like it. No, it's no use talking. Everyone has to make a start, and I'm going to make mine at Leicester."

"Then Mr. Norris is not a gentleman, and I'm afraid that Mrs. Norris is still less a lady. You know he is a wholesale toffy manufacturer, in quite

a large way, but he commenced by making sweets with his own hands, and they do say that Mrs. Norris was with him in the same factory. They're not at all the kind of people with whom you are used to associate."

"Especially lately," Molly sighed. "You have no idea with what curiosities I've had to associate in my time. I'm sure I've been in worse company than I'm likely to find at Leicester."

"Then of course one can't blink the fact that you've only to put your hand to paper to be the possessor of practically any amount of money you choose. Considering that you have five thousand a year of your very own, it does seem dreadful that you should have to take such a position with such people as the Norris's, at such a pittance."

Mrs. Waller had got up, and was moving to the door.

"Miss Jane, I am going. I have requested you over and over again not to refer to a chapter in my life which I hope is closed for ever. Every time you do, I shall take it as a hint that you wish to be rid of me." She paused in the doorway to fire a parting shot. "I am going to Leicester on Monday, and all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't stop me, if they tried."

When she had gone, Miss Jane sighed. Miss Ellen looked up at her from her knitting.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

"It seems so terrible that one so young and

beautiful, and of such high family, and who is, after all, one of the richest women in England, should be compelled by the force of cruel circumstances to be the mere menial—for she'll be little else—of such a woman as Mrs. Norris."

"What would you have her do? Is she any better off with us here, when things have come to such a pitch that she scarcely dares to put her nose outside the door? I'm fonder of her a good deal than her own mother is, but I don't mind admitting that for our sakes, as well as for her own, I shan't be sorry when she's gone. I shall expect to have the house burnt over our heads if she stops much longer."

"But suppose they follow her to Leicester."

"I quite expect they will. I shall be very much surprised if they don't."

"Ellen! How can you talk in that cold-blooded way?"

"If they persecute her here, why shouldn't they do the same to her there? Leicester isn't the other side of the world. I'm quite aware that there's something to be said on both sides of the question, but I certainly feel that if I had been in her position I should have called in the police long ago."

"I wonder if Mr. Waller is really dead."

"Fiddlesticks! He's no more dead than you are. One of these days he'll turn up with a smile on his face as if he'd done nothing out of the way. I know these men. I should like to see her face when he does."

"Ellen, considering that you know how I feel about her, you might speak of her a little more tenderly than you do—you really might. I can't think what Mr. Drummond will say when he knows."

"If you ask me, Jane, I should express an opinion that as Mrs. Waller's movements are no business of his, he has no right to say anything at all."

On the Monday morning Molly started with her scanty luggage by an early train, and on Ryde Pier was just about to board the Portsmouth boat when Mr. Drummond, disembarking from the steamer which had just come from Portsmouth, caught sight of her standing by the gangway at the other side of the pier, and hurried across to her.

"Why," he exclaimed, "where are you going? I was just coming to see you."

"And I," she said, seemingly finding it a little difficult to meet his eager glances with steady eyes, "am going away."

"But where? To Portsmouth for the day?"

"No, a little farther than Portsmouth, and for longer than a day. But what are you doing? You mustn't come on board—the boat is just starting."

"I presume I can travel as a passenger."

His tone was brusque. She stared at him as if surprised.

"Didn't I see you on the steamer which had just come from Portsmouth?"

"You did see me, did you? As you did not

vouchsafe the least sign of recognition, I took it for granted that you did not see me. Yes, I was on the steamer which has just come from Portsmouth ; that is not necessarily a reason why I should not journey by this one back again." By this time they were both of them on deck. "Where are you going —you'll be better here."

"This deck is for first-class passengers only—I am travelling third. I am going to the third-class quarters."

He looked as if he would like to say something but refrained. He followed her down the companion way. The boat was crowded ; in the cheaper parts there was standing room only. They went fore. It was not easy to find a place in which they could have anything approaching to a confidential conversation. She stood with her hand resting against the fluke of the anchor, confronting him.

"I wish you would not come with me, even so far as Portsmouth. I would sooner be alone."

"I am sorry to seem to disoblige you, but this is an occasion when you have left me no alternative. I think I am at least entitled to know where you are going."

"I don't know that you are, I think you aren't —I would much rather you didn't."

"You are going to do something of which you know I shall disapprove. What are you going to do ?"

"I don't know that you are entitled to approve or disapprove of anything I do."

"That is nonsense; you know better. I thought we had got beyond that stage."

"What stage?"

"The stage of pretending to be ostriches; as if by burying our heads in the sand we could hide from ourselves the fact that things are as they are. You know perfectly well that even a movement of your little finger is to me a fact of momentous importance. If I can be nothing else, I can at least be your brother; and I have yet to learn that a brother is not entitled to disapprove or otherwise of what his sister does."

"You are not my brother."

"No, thank Heaven; but I'm going to treat you as if I were—since fate's against us. Come, Molly, don't be horrid; and don't, where I am concerned, try to stand on tip-toe. What's up? Has anything happened?"

"You are disarranging everything." The girl tried to look serious, but found it rather difficult. "I'm going to turn over a fresh page in my life."

"You are always turning over fresh pages; you might give yourself the chance getting to the bottom of one."

"I think I've got to the bottom of the one at Shanklin. If there's anything more on that page, I feel sure it's something disagreeable; and as very little on it has been nice, I think it is only natural that I should want to turn it over before I get to something worse."

"And what do you expect is written on the new page?"

"I have not the gift of prophecy. I'm rather glad I haven't; and I'm not very hopeful. I've got beyond the hoping stage——"

"At nineteen! Listen to this centenarian."

"I shall be twenty next week."

"Do you think that I don't know it? Haven't I been making all sorts of plans to celebrate the great day, and I'm going to celebrate it wherever you are. I warn you of that."

"I don't think that nursery governesses are offered many opportunities by their employers to celebrate their birthdays."

"Nursery governesses? What on earth are you talking about? Molly, what nonsense are you up to now?"

"I am going to earn my own living, that's all. I suppose that nowadays a girl is entitled to earn her own living without asking even a brother's permission."

There was rather an odd look on Mr. Drummond's face, as if he were at the same time bewildered, stern, and angry.

"I'm inclined to think that it's very lucky that I came upon you when I did. I can at least insist upon your giving me an explanation. You'll be good enough, in the first place, to tell me where you're going."

"And suppose I won't?"

"Then I shall follow and find out."

"And suppose I turn for help to a policeman, and request him to prevent your annoying me?"

"I'm not afraid of a policeman, especially if I made him acquainted with the object I had in view. Molly, what have I done that you should wish to use me like this?"

"I am not using you, it is you who are using me. I told you I didn't wish you to come on the steamer, and I didn't. I didn't wish you to know where I am going, and I don't; I do wish to turn over a new page, and you won't let me."

"What did you mean by your allusion just now to nursery governesses?"

"I'm going to be a nursery governess, and now you have it; and don't you dare to criticise, because criticism of any sort will be resented. You are not my brother, and when you pretend you are, it is you who are the ostrich, not I. And, what's more, I don't want you to be my brother."

"Thank you, Molly, that's the best thing you've said to me."

"And what's more, I don't feel towards you in the least like a sister; I almost wish I did. And that's one reason why I don't wish you to know where I'm going. You'd want to come and see me—"

"I shall come and see you, if it's at the other side of the world."

"I don't want you to come. Every time I'm near you I feel what I don't want to feel, and—it isn't fair. When I want to see you I'll let you know; circumstanced as you know I am, I don't think it's fair of you to thrust yourself upon me against my express wishes."

"Molly, I'm the only friend you have in the world."

"Miss Whiting is a friend of mine."

"In a quite different sense."

"There I agree with you; her idea of friendship is considering me, not herself. When I give her clearly to understand that I wish to do a thing she shows her friendship by not attempting opposition, the only result of which, she knows, would be to make me unhappy and cross."

"You are mistaken. She doesn't show her friendship that way, but only shows what a mistaken view of friendship she has. If you wished to commit suicide, do you consider that she'd be showing her friendship by volunteering her assistance?"

"That's quite different. Don't be absurd. I wish you would go up on deck, I'm sure you have a first-class ticket; you've no right to come down here among the third-class passengers."

"Come, Molly, tell me where you are going, please. Unless it is some place that you are ashamed to mention."

"I'm not in the least ashamed. I'm going to Leicester."

"To Leicester ? Of all holes, why Leicester ?"

"It's not a hole, and, if it is, I don't care. As I was never there in my life I don't know what it is. I am going to Leicester to be a nursery governess ; and as to a governess her character is her most valuable possession, I must request you to go to the upper deck. It's not the slightest use your looking angry, I shall be more angry than you very soon ; then you'll be sorry that you didn't go when I asked you."

The young man turned as if he were unwilling to let her see what was in her eyes. There was a perceptible pause before he said, very quietly and very gravely :

"I am not sure that I shall let you do this thing."

"You won't let me ? What do you mean by you won't let me ? Harry ! Who are you that you should talk of letting me ?"

"It's no use, Molly, not the slightest use. We've had no secrets from each other, you and I since our re-meeting ; the mere fact that you're so reluctant to give me your confidence now makes me suspicious. You know that a word from me would soon make an end of this madcap scheme of yours ; you'll have to persuade me that it will not be the part of a true friend to speak it."

The girl looked at him with an air which suggested that she would have liked to be ten or twelve feet high, so that she might have crushed him by

the majesty of her presence ; she could hardly have been angrier whatever her height might have been.

“Let me pass. Harry ! you dare to touch me ! You dare to try and stop me against my will. If you don’t let me pass this moment I’ll appeal to the passengers for help. I beg you to believe that I mean it.”

Drummond looked at her for a moment as if he were disposed to dare her to do her worst ; then, as if suddenly changing his mind, he stepped aside, his hat in his hand. She went past him, her head in the air ; and she delivered herself of what she apparently intended to be some parting observation as she went.

“Thank you ; that is better. I am glad that you have not quite forgotten that you’re not my brother. And let me tell you that if you so much as try to follow me to the train, I will give you cause to regret it.”

She marched with her head, if anything, still more in the air, straight to the other side of the boat. She had not been there very long before a small girl observed to the woman who was with her :

“Mother, what’s that lady crying for ? ”

The woman, rather startled, glanced at the lady to whom the too observant child referred. She saw that, if the lady were not actually crying, she was holding her handkerchief to her eyes in a manner

which was at least suspicious. As Molly was a girl who never cried, and since she had just succeeded in getting her own way, one might have been excused for wondering what the handkerchief was doing there.

CHAPTER X

THE NEW GOVERNESS

MRS. WALLER walked straight off the steamer when it reached Portsmouth Pier, her head still in the air, to a third-class compartment in the waiting train. She placed herself in a corner seat, where she sat perfectly still until the train started, suffering no intrusion of any sort or kind. Yet when the train began to draw out of the station, instead of being thankful, she sighed, and to herself she said :

“I think that he might at least have tried to come and say good-bye; he doesn’t know when he’ll see me again—if ever.”

Apart from all other considerations, Mr. Drummond was otherwise engaged. As he got off the boat on to the pier, he laid his hand on the shoulder of a short man in front of him.

“Excuse me, but I should like a word with you.”

The short man looked round as if not too pleased to be detained.

“Who are you? What do you want? I don’t know you. You’re a stranger to me.”

He spoke with a sort of wheeze, as if something were the matter with his vocal chords.

"You have a bad memory, I fear. I certainly have seen you before—on a certain afternoon, not so very long ago, on the cliff above Luccombe Chine."

The short man's little eyes were set deep in his head, and were of a pinky hue, like those of a ferret. As he met Mr. Drummond's steady gaze they blinked curiously.

"You are mistaking me for somebody else. I don't know anything about any Luccombe Chine. You let me go. I want to catch this train."

"And I don't intend that you shall."

"You don't what? You take your hands off my shoulder. What do you think you're playing at?"

"If you don't keep still and behave, I shall call that constable over there and give you into charge."

"Give me into charge! What the something is the man talking about? What are you going to give me in charge for? And, anyhow, who are you?"

The little man had apparently suddenly become half beside himself with rage. Mr. Drummond remained perfectly calm.

"Your question shall be answered to your entire satisfaction. I should very much like to throw you into the river, but, under the circumstances, I think that perhaps I had better try another way. Officer!"

He addressed the constable who stood at the foot of the stairs leading to the platform or the

The New Governess III

station. The little man made a sudden effort to twist himself free ; the other's grip of him was too secure.

“Here, what is your little game ? I don't want to be mixed up with any policemen.”

“So I should imagine ; I'm a bigger and a stronger man than you are ; you had better keep still. Officer !”

“You leave that policeman alone ; don't you bring him over here. If you've got anything to say to me, you say it to me as man to man.”

“You should have thought of that before, then I might have talked to you as man to man. Now the policeman is coming.” The policeman was standing in front of them, waiting to be addressed. “Constable, I wish you to arrest this man for annoying a lady friend of mine. He has followed her all the way from Shanklin——”

“How do you know that ? You only came aboard at Ryde.”

“All the same, I do know it. She goes in fear of him ; he has already assaulted her once. She is going to London lest he should do so again. I want you to prevent him going to London by the same train.”

“You hear what this gentleman says,” remarked the policeman. “What have you got to say to it ?”

“He's mistook his man, that's what I've got to say. I never saw him in his life before, and I don't believe he ever saw me, and I

no more want to interfere with any lady, friend of his or no friend of his, than I want to miss this train. In fact I've got to catch it, having an important engagement in town which I shan't be able to keep if I don't."

"I think, sir, you had better let him go. I'll see that he does not annoy anyone between this and London."

"No, possibly not, but he will directly he gets there. If I cannot prevent him travelling by this train by any other means, I'll give him into custody for assault and attempted murder."

The little man did his best to present a picture of surprise and virtuous indignation. Unfortunately he over-acted it.

"Assault and attempted murder! Well, I never did in all my life. I swear that I know no more what he's talking about than the boards of this here pier; it's only some game he's up to to prevent me catching my train. The idea of my assaulting him, considering the sizes of us, is too ridiculous. I've got to catch my train."

"Then I'm afraid you won't; there's the bell—that means the train's just off."

The policeman's bearing did not suggest so much sympathy as perhaps the little man would have liked.

"Do you mean to say my train is going? You let go of my shoulder, I've got to catch that train."

There was something in the very intensity of the little man's rage which suggested that it was rather forced. The policeman spoke to Mr. Drummond.

"You'd better let him go, sir. He'll never catch his train ; it's out of the station by now."

Mrs. Waller journeyed to town, unconscious of the service which Mr. Drummond had rendered her. She crossed to St. Pancras, and took a Midland train to Leicester. On the platform of Leicester station an incident took place in which she played a leading part, but of which she remained unconscious. She was going towards the end of the train in search of her luggage when a man, coming out of the refreshment room, seeing her approach, instantly drew back again. Had she been some terrible creature he could hardly have seemed more surprised and troubled. He stood just inside the door, as if he were startled half out of his senses.

"It is she—there's no doubt about that. My word, what an escape ! Half a dozen more seconds and she would have seen me."

He waited a few moments, then cautiously put his head out. He could see her halfway down the platform, standing by the luggage van.

"She is picking out her baggage ; that looks as if she were going to stay here. What does she want in a place like Leicester ? What a state I'm in, all shivers and shakes. I shouldn't have thought it was in me to feel like this. Funny how five foot three

of femininity can affect a man. She's found her luggage, that porter is taking it for her to a cab. She seems to be alone; what am I to do? Lose sight of her or—or what? That's the question. The mere sight of her makes me feel—I shouldn't like to have to say exactly how it does make me feel. I won't lose sight of her till I've got to."

Mrs. Waller drove in the cab to Acacia Villa, the residence of Mrs. Norris, wholly oblivious of the fact that a second cab was not far behind her, in which sat a man who seemed to be taking a most singular interest in the cab in front. Acacia Villa was some little distance from the station. It stood in a broad street of newish houses, red-bricked, gabled, casement-windowed, of the modern detached villa residence type. Acacia Villa proved to be the largest house in the road, being chiefly remarkable for the spick-and-span order of its appearance and surroundings. It stood "in its own grounds." There was obviously a tennis lawn at the back, screened from the public road by a privet hedge, which was kept pruned to an excruciating point of neatness. There was a carriage drive in front, and several "ornamental beds" of gaudy flowers—the kind which gardeners choose when left to themselves, and not influenced by any individuality of taste on the part of the patron. The brass-work about the front door, of which there seemed to be a good deal, shone like burnished gold; the door itself looked as if it had been repainted last week. It was with feelings of

what the girl told herself was ridiculous tremulousness that she pressed the push of the electric bell.

The second cab drove on. When it was well past the man put his head out of the window and inquired :

“ Whose house is that ? ”

“ It belongs to Mr. Norris, sir—Mr. Thomas Norris.”

“ And who may Mr. Thomas Norris be ? ”

“ Norris’s Toothsome Toffy, sir. He’s got a factory down the town where it does a large trade, advertises a lot. You must have seen some of his advertisements, sir : Try Toothsome Toffy : Epicures Eat it. Then there’s a large picture poster, a lady and a gentleman eating it with delight. You must have seen it, sir.”

“ I daresay I have, without noticing it. Drive me back to the station.” He drew back into the cab like a man who was thunderstruck. “ What in the name of all that’s wonderful is she doing in the house of Mr. Norris ? It’s all I can do to keep from calling to ask. What wouldn’t I give for, we’ll say, a few words with her.”

The door of Acacia Villa was opened by a non-descript individual, probably somewhere in the late ‘teens, who might have been either a page or a footman. He surveyed the visitor with an expression of countenance which, as it were, hovered on the verge of a grin.

"Mrs. Norris?" she inquired faintly. It was absurd how faint she did feel.

"What name?"

"Miss Mitford." The girl had all but given her name as Mrs. Waller. The consciousness of how near she had been, made her tremulousness still greater. The nondescript's expression became quite a grin.

"The new governess? I didn't quite catch the name, but now you mention it I believe it was Mitford. Mrs. Norris is out just now, but I daresay if you'll step inside she won't be very long. She's gone calling in her motor-car, and Miss Agatha has gone with her. Miss Cecilia, I don't know where she is. If you'll come in." The girl went in. The nondescript eyed the cab without. "Oh, you've got some luggage, have you? I suppose that had better come in, too. Driver, you'll have to carry that box upstairs."

"Will I?" returned the driver of the cab. "That, my lad, is where you are mistaken. It's not part of my duty as a driver of cabs to carry luggage upstairs for anyone, least of all for chaps like you. Come and lift down this box, and if you don't want to pay my time perhaps you'll move yourself doing it."

"You have got a sauce, I must say," observed the nondescript.

"No compulsion on you to say anything, my high-spirited nobleman. Where did you get those things from? I know you, Bob Barker. Your mother

goes out charing. Don't suppose you ever had a pair of breeches in your life without a hole in them till your master gave you some. Are you going to lift this box down, or am I to drive away with it when the young lady's paid me my fare ? "

While Molly, who was standing in the doorway, was wondering what would be the outcome of the little discussion, someone came along the drive to the front door.

"What's that, Barker ? Who's come ? "

"New governess, Mr. William."

"New governess—ho ! " One felt from the speaker's tone that the arrival of a person of that description was an event without the slightest interest for him ; an opinion which for some cause was promptly changed when, coming into the hall, he saw Molly there with her purse in her hand. In an instant his hat was in his hand. "I beg your pardon, but—I'm afraid they're keeping you waiting. Barker, where's my mother ? "

"Mrs. Norris is not in, sir ; she's gone out calling in the motor-car, and Miss Agatha has gone with her."

"Why do you keep this lady waiting here ? What's the cabman waiting for ? "

"I'm waiting," said the cabman, "for this young gentleman friend of yours to lend me a hand getting down this luggage. He's taking his time. I'm also waiting to be paid my fare."

"Barker, you get down that luggage this moment,

and off you go with it upstairs. What's your fare, driver; where have you come from?"

The girl went hurrying forward.

"Excuse me, I was only waiting for my luggage to be taken down to pay my fare. Will that be right?" She handed the driver a coin.

"Quite right, miss, and thank you very much. I'd have carried your luggage up to the top of the house for you, and further, with pleasure, and made nothing of it, if it hadn't been for Mr. Bob Barker. I'm not going to have a gutter brat like him trying to sit on me. Why, I don't believe he can spell his own name. I remember my wife and her next door neighbour giving his mother two half breeches that he might have a pair."

"Now, Barker, you fool, carry this lady's luggage upstairs. Won't you come into the drawing-room? I find my mother is out. Have you had any tea?"

The young gentleman ushered the girl into an apartment which was in as beautiful order as the garden at the front of the house—everything of the best, according to the "lights" of the owner, in its proper place, spotlessly clean.

"Thank you," said the young girl. "I've had no tea."

The young gentleman rang the bell. When the maid appeared he issued his orders with the air of an autocrat.

"Stockley, let us have tea at once."

The maid did not seem to show as much celebrity in obeying his orders as she might have done.

“Who for, sir ? ”

“Who do you suppose it’s for ? For this lady and for me.”

One felt that the young gentleman was trying to give orders as if he were quite sure that those orders would be instantly obeyed, and yet at the back of his mind he had a doubt. If so, it was more than justified. The maid looked at the girl—looked her up and down would perhaps be a more correct way of putting it.

“Are you the new governess, miss ? ” Molly admitted that she was. “Mrs. Norris left orders that if you came while she was out I wasn’t to bother about tea till she came back. She said you might wait in the school-room, or your bedroom, miss, whichever you liked. You know, Mr. William, Mrs. Norris is most particular about the way in which her drawing-room is used ; I should get into trouble if I were to serve tea in here without her specially ordering it. I’ll show you the way upstairs, miss.”

Mr. William began to explain, rather haltingly, as if suddenly conscious that his position was a little undignified.

“I’m awfully sorry, but the fact is that I’m afraid in some ways my mother is a little peculiar, and if she says——”

Molly cut him short.

“Pray don’t apologise to me.” She turned to the

maid. "If you will show me the way to my bedroom I shall be obliged."

Molly and the maid quitted the room. Mr. William being left alone, said to himself with a degree of emphasis which it is not easy to reproduce :

"What a perfectly stunning girl ! And such topping good form ! There's nothing to equal her in Leicester—simply nothing."

The maid said to Molly as they were going up the stairs :

"Shall I show you to your bedroom, miss, or won't you go to the schoolroom ? It isn't so bad in the schoolroom ; there is a chair to sit on."

"I think, if you don't mind, I'd rather go to my bedroom. I've been travelling since early this morning, and I rather want a wash."

Molly spoke as if her heart were rather in her mouth. The maid eyed her narrowly.

"You do look tired. I'll bring you up a cup of tea if you like, and chance Mrs. Norris."

Molly had had nothing to eat since leaving Shanklin, and would have liked the cup of tea, accompanied possibly by two or three slices of bread and butter, but the maid's last words decided her ; she was not disposed to incur, on her very first day, the displeasure of her pupil's mother, so she declined. When the maid left her, her heart, already heavy in her bosom, became still heavier. The apartment in which she found herself was apparently intended to be a box-room rather than a bedroom. There was no fire-

place ; only a dormer window too high for her to look out of. There was a tiny bed in a corner, a shabby piece of carpet on the floor, and an equally shabby painted chest of drawers, which were apparently intended also to serve as dressing-table and washhand stand. As the maid had hinted, there was no chair ; it was difficult to see where they could have put it if there had been ; Molly's tin trunk and brown leather bag practically occupied all the rest of the available floor space.

Molly had not expected anything quite so bad as this. She shut her eyes to keep back the tears which would force their way into the corners ; it was odd how apt they were to get the upper hand of her of late. It was some excuse that at the moment she was hungry, tired, and heart-sick altogether. She half wished when it was too late that she had accepted the servant's kindly meant offer, and chanced Mrs. Norris, by indulging in a cup of tea. She was too tired even to commence to unpack. She sat on the edge of the bed and wondered how long it would be before Mrs. Norris condescended to return.

She had been there, however, only a few minutes when someone rapped smartly at the panels of the door, and without waiting for an invitation came into the room. She rose hurriedly, anticipating an interview with her employer ; but the person who had come in was a girl of about her own age, inclined to be a little over-dressed, and also a little stout.

"You are Miss Mitford? I hope I'm not bothering you. I'm awfully sorry mamma wasn't in when you came. It's just like her! She knew perfectly well the time you were coming, and she might have made arrangements that there should be someone to receive you. I say!"—the new-comer was examining Molly as if she were some curiosity—"Won't mamma's nose be out of joint when she does see you! You're as pretty as paint."

CHAPTER XI

CECILIA

THE greeting was such an odd one that it was not strange that Molly scarcely knew how to take it. The new-comer seemed to mean well enough, and apparently she took it for granted that the new governess was a person to whom she could say anything and treat anyhow. Without giving Molly a chance of answering, she rattled on :

“Isn’t this a beast of a room ? I’ve told mamma over and over again that it isn’t fit to put a servant in, to say nothing of a lady. I only wish I looked as much a lady as you do. By the way, what shall I call you ? I’m not going to call you Miss Mitford. I am Cecilia Norris, Miss Norris ; don’t Miss Norris me ; I’m Cecilia to you. And what am I to call you ?”

“My Christian name is Molly.”

“Molly, what a duck of a name ! Somehow it just suits you, it’s as pretty as you are. Look here, come down to my room ; we can talk there. Take your hat off, you can titivate in my place.”

Molly obediently removed her headgear ; the moment she had done so, Miss Norris unceremoniously took it into her own possession.

“I say, what a hat. I call that something like a

hat. Isn't it Paris? However much did you pay for it?"

"I think it cost about twenty guineas."

"Twenty guineas!" Miss Norris stared. As a matter of fact it had been Molly's going away hat; she had come down in it because it was practically the only hat she had. Her only other one had cost one and elevenpence-halfpenny at a Shanklin draper's; it had not been deemed good enough for her first appearance in Leicester. All the same, the moment she had spoken she wished that she had not brought it to Leicester, and that she had said nothing about twenty guineas. Miss Norris's comments were frank and free. "However do you come to have a hat which cost twenty guineas? Mamma pulls a face if I have one which costs five. Someone must have given it to you. I wish someone would give me a hat which cost twenty guineas. Tell me, who did give it you? Is it a secret?"

"No, it is not a secret—at least in the sense you mean. It was given me by one I shall never see again."

"Molly! It sounds like a love story. Have you had a—but I should think by the look of you you'd had dozens. But come down to my room and tell me all about it."

The vivacious young lady, slipping her arm through Molly's, led her down to an apartment on the first floor which was of a very different description from the one she had just quitted. It contained as much expensive furniture as it very well could. Everything

looked as if it were new ; and about the whole of it there was an atmosphere of almost painful neatness ; a fact to which Miss Norris at once directed her companion's attention.

“ Isn’t it horrid ? Don’t you hate a room like this ? Mamma is mad on what she calls tidiness. She is down on me if I leave so much as a book about or a ribbon out of place. I like a room which looks as if it were lived in. If ever I have a place of my own, I’ll take care that every room in the house looks like that. I tell mamma that Acacia Villa looks more like a series of an upholsterer’s show rooms than a human habitation. It does make her so mad. Have a chocolate ? ”

She took a large box out of a drawer which she first of all unlocked.

“ Mamma won’t let me have chocolates, or sweets of any kind ; she’d have a fit if she were told I bought them ; and of course I know with my figure they are not exactly the sort of things I ought to gorge on—which is one reason why I do. I know someone who gives me all the chocolates I want, so why shouldn’t I ? Molly—you don’t mind me calling you Molly, do you ? ”

“ If your mamma does not object.”

“ Mamma—mamma objects to everything, every blessed single thing ; which is why the whole of us, from papa down to Agatha, not excluding the servants, do lots of things which I don’t believe we should do if it weren’t that we know she objects to

them. I say, Molly, that frock looks as if it came from the same place as the hat; did the—did the same person give it you?"

Miss Norris asked this with a suggestiveness which made Molly change colour—a fact on which Miss Norris instantly fastened.

"There, that's the very thing you wanted, a touch of colour. It isn't often that blushing becomes a girl, but it does you. You'll have a time when mamma sees you."

"Why? I'm not always blushing."

"Goose? That's not the reason—at least it wouldn't be if blushing didn't become you so. Agatha's last governess, Miss Pickthaw, was not so plain as she might have been, and that's really why mamma got rid of her. My dear, you're a perfect dream of prettiness, and you've such an air about you! However came you to take a place like this?"

"I had to do something to earn my own living."

"Then I should say you've only just begun. You remind me somehow—though you're heaps prettier and better style—of the Duke of Courtland's daughter who opened a bazaar here last summer. She gave one the impression that she never had done anything in the course of her whole natural life, and never would."

"I do assure you that I'm not anything like that. I can work as hard as anyone, and I mean to. I hope you won't give Mrs. Norris the impression that I'm absolutely incapable and perfectly useless."

It will be dreadful for me if you do ; I do want to get a chance of proving that I can do something."

"Molly, there's a secret about you."

Molly shrank back, all white and trembling.

"Whatever makes you say that ?"

"And I shouldn't wonder if there's a romance ; perhaps one of these days, if I'm nice to you, you'll tell me all about it—that is, if you stay here long enough. I say that because, although I don't want to discourage you, you are no more suited to be nursery governess to Agatha Norris in Acacia Villa than I am to be the Queen of Sheba. Don't look so frightened."

Molly had sat down on a chair as if paralysed, because her legs declined any longer to sustain her. Miss Norris going to her, kneeling on the floor, put her arms about her waist.

"What a darling you are ! I should think that every man who sees you falls in love with you."

"Oh, don't talk like that, please don't. Don't say such things at all. I'm not in the least the kind of person you take me for."

"I should think that's very likely, though I'm not at all sure what I do take you for, unless it's a fairy princess disguised as a mortal."

"Why, what makes you say—have you any particular reason for thinking that your mother will object to me ? What reason can you have ?"

"That." Miss Norris, taking a hand mirror off the table, held it in such a position that Molly could see

the reflection of her own face. She gazed at it as if she were both startled and puzzled.

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t you guess? My dear, if there’s one thing Mrs. Thomas Norris, my respected mother, does object to it is a pretty governess.”

“But I’m not pretty.”

“No, you’re not, you’re lovely; and that’s the trouble. Mere prettiness mamma might, with a frightful effort, bring herself to overlook for a time; but loveliness such as yours—! However, as I said, I don’t want to discourage you; the future will show—I fancy the very near future. You see, my dear, it’s this way: mamma never was good looking; I take after her. Do you think I’m ugly beyond anything? Honest.”

“I don’t think you’re ugly at all; but I think you say rather foolish things.”

“Thank you; and you’re not the only one who thinks so, either. Mamma is not only plain, she is older than papa, who is younger than she thinks he ought to be—in all ways. If he so as much looks at anything in petticoats she makes the feathers fly; and if he looks at you she’ll feel like murder—and then there’s Bill.”

“Who is Bill?” Molly asked this in a voice which was so faint that it was really hardly a whisper.

“Bill, my dear, is my brother; my only one, thank goodness; the family hope and pride. Mamma

calls him William, papa calls him Will, and I call him Bill—and so does everybody else except mamma and papa. I heard mamma tell papa over and over again that Bill's at a dangerous age. I don't know what age that is, because it seems to me that all male things are always at a dangerous age. Molly, I'll tell you what is supposed to be a great family secret—Bill kissed Miss Pickthaw."

"Who is Miss Pickthaw?"

"I told you; Agatha's last governess. She was quite kissable; I don't blame him; I rather think I should have kissed her myself if I'd been Bill. My own impression is that he kissed her whenever he got the chance, and I shouldn't wonder if she kissed him. But mamma only caught him once, and—oh! wasn't there a row. Bill was sent to Lamberhurst——"

"Who is Lamberhurst?"

"Lamberhurst is not a person, it's a place—Lamberhurst Rectory. Bill was a pupil there. Mamma sends him there whenever she's out with him, as if it were very much the same thing as sending him to penal servitude—a punishment beyond words. But I happen to know that Bill would a good deal rather be at Lamberhurst than at Acacia Villa; he has a much better time there than he has at home. I don't know where Miss Pickthaw went, but she was sent away from Acacia Villa—which makes it so funny."

"I don't think there's anything funny about your story at all. I think your brother ought to be ashamed of himself. It was very hard upon Miss Pickthaw."

"Well, I'm not so sure; I don't think it would be hard on anyone to be sent away from Acacia Villa. The servants don't think so; they're always going; they don't wait to be sent. Mamma declares that she pays the best wages of anyone in Leicester, and I daresay she does—the kitchen maid gets more than you do—but not one of them will stop. She's taken to importing them from a distance, which makes no difference—they all keep going. Why I said it's funny is because, in getting you here, mamma has been caught in her own trap. Miss Pickthaw was thirty-one; mamma says that's the designing age, which is as much nonsense as what she says about Bill being at a dangerous age. My conviction is that women are always at a designing age. Aren't I a woman myself? I know. When Miss Whiting wrote and said you were only nineteen, mamma said that you were too young to be designing—when I was nineteen I was the most designing cat that ever breathed, and now I'm twenty-two I'm worse."

"I wish you wouldn't say such dreadful things. I don't like to hear you. Please let me go—I shan't be ready when Mrs. Norris returns."

"Molly, don't speak to me and look at me like that? Haven't you a sense of humour? I'm the only person in this house who has. Don't say I'm still going to be alone. Don't say that you can't see that I don't mean half I say. I'm a most friendless creature when all is said and done. I believe in the instinct of the dog which tells him at the first smell who is likely to be a

friend to him, and I'm sure I'd like you to be friends with me. I just want to give you a few hints of how the coast is lying and where the shoals are—that's all. You're not cross with me?"

"Of course I'm not cross with you. I only want—I only want to be ready when your mother comes in."

"I think, Molly, if you don't very much mind, I'd like you to kiss me. I never have been kissed by anything so beautiful as you."

"It is you who are the goose, not I."

Molly managed to smile, and she kissed Miss Norris, who suddenly exclaimed :

"Look out—here's mainma ! It's one of her nice points that though she weighs not an ounce less than twenty stone, when she moves about she's like a cat for noiselessness."

Molly still felt the touch of Miss Norris's lips upon her cheek, when the handle was turned and one of the biggest women she had ever seen was standing in the doorway. She addressed both the young women in turn, in English, which as a general rule, was correct enough, but which suggested that correctness had only been acquired at the cost of infinite pains.

"May I ask, Cecilia, what this means ? And if you are Miss Mitford, I may as well tell you at the outset that I wish the rules which I have made for the conduct of this house to be strictly observed. Your bedroom is your own, and the schoolroom in a certain sense, and your duties will often take you to Agatha's bedroom, but you will confine yourself, if you please, to those

three apartments, unless I expressly invite you to enter others."

"Really, mamma, what nonsense you do talk. Surely Miss Mitford can come into my bedroom if I ask her to."

"How often am I to tell you, Cecilia, that this is my house, and not yours? Miss Mitford will do as I wish her if she wants to remain in it. As I have said, I wish her to confine herself to the three apartments I have named, except at my express invitation. Your invitation, so far as she is concerned, carries no weight whatever. Are you Miss Mitford? If you are, be so good as to come with me to the schoolroom. I wish to speak to you."

Molly followed the big woman very much as a criminal might the executioner who leads him to his doom. She tried to bear herself with a gallant demeanour, an outward show of courage, but she found it very hard!

CHAPTER XII

NOT KNOWN

THE schoolroom proved to be a small apartment, not over-furnished, with an old leather-topped table, some book shelves on which were a scanty array of volumes of an elementary educational kind, three or four wooden chairs, and a Windsor arm-chair which had seen much service. It struck the girl as pretty bare, although, as the maid-servant had hinted, it was much more luxurious than her bedroom. Mrs. Norris evidently only spent money on those rooms which were intended to be seen.

She placed herself in the Windsor chair at the head of the table, and, resting her elbows on the arms, surveyed Molly with a critical coldness, which the girl, in her then condition, felt was almost more than she could bear. Nearly all the courage had gone out of her ; she was being subjected to a kind of treatment for which she was not prepared. The expression on Mrs. Norris's face was so unfriendly that it made her feel that she had been guilty of some heinous action to have earned it. She would very much have liked the support of a chair, but to such a state had she been brought that she did not dare to seat herself without permission. . She stood, a pathetic, frightened

little figure at the other end of the leather-covered table.

"Turn round." Mrs. Norris spoke as if she were issuing an order to a menial who had misconducted herself. Molly obediently turned. "That frock is not suited to a young person in your position. Where did you get it?"

"It was given to me."

Molly's tone as she conveyed this information to a second member of the Norris family was meekness itself.

"By whom?" Molly was still. Mrs. Norris eyed her as if she were a culprit. "You must understand that I am very particular how the young women in my employment dress themselves, and especially the young persons who occupy your position. I have no wish to press you for details which you would rather not give, and possibly I would rather not hear, but I doubt if two years' wages would pay for the dress which you say was given you. I certainly cannot allow you to wear it while you are in my service. You must attire yourself as is proper in the condition of life to which you have been called. I am most particular upon such points."

Molly shivered. This was one of the most unpleasant persons she had every encountered. There was worse to come.

"I may tell you at once that had I seen you before engaging you I should not have allowed you to enter my house."

What Molly felt to be injustice of this drove her to speech.

"Why? What harm have I done? Why do you say that?"

"Your appearance is against you."

"My appearance? I always thought——"

"I do not ask what you ever thought. Do not interrupt me, please. Your appearance is very much against you. Had I seen you first I should not have dreamt of engaging you. I consider that Miss Whiting has not behaved well. She knows how particular I am upon such points. However, I suppose I must make the best of it now that you are here, but I forbid you to notice in any way, or to speak to, either my husband or my son. You understand?"

"I am sure they cannot wish to speak to me less than I wish to speak to them." Molly drew herself up to her full inches.

"No airs, please, with me. It is your place to do as I tell you, without remark of any kind. You will confine yourself rigidly to your own apartments. Your meals will be sent to you there, and I must request you not to give the servants unnecessary work by lingering over them longer than you can help. As a rule, Agatha will be with you all day long except at mealtimes; she will, of course, have her meals with us. You will see that she rises at seven, superintend her bath and her dressing, and take care that she is down to breakfast precisely at eight. She will be up to lessons at nine, but before

she commences you will make Agatha's bed and your own. You will work with her from nine to eleven, you will then take her out for an hour and a half, and on your return see that she is dressed for lunch at one. She will have lessons with you from two to four, when, as a rule, I take her out with me. While she is out you will go through her wardrobe and see that everything is in proper repair. At half-past five you will have tea, and then, as a rule, Agatha will come to you and you will put her to bed at seven. I will see that you have sewing with which to employ yourself on those occasions when I wish to keep her with me. At seven she goes to bed, and at half-past we dine, and you have supper at eight; and I wish you to be in bed, and the schoolroom lights out, at latest by half-past nine. You understand?"

"I think so." Molly's words were scarcely audible.

"I don't wish you to only think—I wish you to be sure you understand. I am most particular about such points." This seemed to be a sort of catch-phrase with Mrs. Norris. "So long as you do your duty, overlook nothing, neglect nothing, give me no cause for complaint, and keep yourself in the background, as a modest young woman in your position in life should do, you will have a happy and comfortable home. I think that is all I need say to you at present. Take that dress off and never let me see it again while you are in this house. When you

have changed, ring the schoolroom bell, and I will see that Agatha is sent to you. Well, Stockley, what is it?"

The inquiry was addressed to the maid who had shown Molly into her bedroom. She had entered the room bearing an envelope on a salver.

"If you please, madam, the telegraph boy has brought a telegram addressed to Mrs. Waller. I told him that there was no one of that name here, but he said that I'd better come and see you."

"Mrs. Waller?" Mrs. Norris took the envelope off the salver. "I know no one of that name; there's some mistake. Those post office people are always making blunders. There's certainly no one in this house, or in this street, with a name that at all resembles Waller. Tell the telegraph boy that if he likes I will open the envelope and see what is in it, but that nothing is known here of anyone of the name of Waller. But stay, I will come and speak to him myself. About the dress, you will do what I say at once, then ring the schoolroom bell as soon as you are ready."

The last words were addressed to Molly; before she could gather enough of her wits about her to enable her to speak a word, Mrs. Norris and the maid had gone—with the telegram addressed to Mrs. Waller. Molly made a half movement towards the door, with a vague idea of following them and claiming the telegram; then faltered, and refrained. What explanation could she offer of how such a telegram

came to be intended for her. She was quite sure that if Mrs. Norris even so much as suspected that she had come there under what she would call a false name, she would not allow her to remain under her chaste roof another hour. What was she to do ? What could she do ? Who could the telegram be from ?

Momentary reflection showed that this latter question was not an easy one to answer. Miss Whiting would certainly not address her as Mrs. Waller ; she was perfectly well aware that at Leicester she was Miss Mitford. Mr. Drummond might, if he knew where she was ; but how could he know that ? She had refused to tell him where she was going. He had not followed her, he could not guess ; the only person who could give him information was Miss Whiting. If she had told him anything she would certainly have told him that all communications were to be sent to Miss Mitford, not to Mrs. Waller. Therefore it would seem that the telegram had emanated from someone who knew more about her than she supposed, yet whose identity, as things were turning out, was likely to remain hidden from her.

Could it have come from one of the persons to escape whose too close attentions had been one of the unacknowledged reasons which had taken her to Leicester ? Could they—that mysterious, impersonal pronoun, covering she knew not whom—have already ascertained her whereabouts ? How had they done

it? What had they to say to her if they had? If only she might have had one glance at the telegram, afterwards she would have returned it willingly enough to the boy who had brought it. The feeling that she did not know what threat it might have contained was not one which was likely to add to her sense of well-being. She was not sure that it would not have been as well to risk being sent away at once rather than allow that telegram to be returned unopened.

All at once someone opened the schoolroom door, to which her back was turned. She started round. While wrestling with the riddle of whom the telegram could have come from, several minutes had slipped away. She had forgotten Mrs. Norris's instructions to change her frock at once. She expected to find herself confronted by that lady, in a more unfriendly humour still; instead in the doorway stood a little girl who was looking at her with the very biggest pair of dark eyes she had ever seen. She shut the door carefully behind her and came into the room. There was about her that air of gravity and aloofness which is not infrequently seen in the young children of elderly parents.

"You are Miss Mitford? I am Agatha. I think I shall like you—you are just like a person in a fairy tale. I do hope you will like me."

Something in the child's voice, on her face, in her manners, touched Molly, in the midst of her perplexities, to a show of feeling which was as sudden as it

was unusual. She put her arms about her and stooped to kiss her—she had not to stoop very far.

“I do think I shall like you ; it's nice to meet someone who does make me feel like that, and rather a change.”

The child was eyeing her with her great dark eyes—very gravely ; as if she were something unusual, of which it was necessary to take particular stock.

“How short you are.”

“I know I am—I'm so sorry ; but I never have been any taller, you know.”

“I'm not sorry ; I like you to be short so as to be nearer to me. Are you tired ?”

“I'm afraid I am, a little ; do I look it ?”

“Yes, you do ; you look as if you would like to lay your head upon a pillow and never wake again.”

“That's exactly how I feel ; what eyes you have to be able to see all that. Are you very clever ? Because I ought to tell you so that we may start fair, that I am not. I shouldn't be surprised if, while I'm teaching you, I am teaching myself too.”

“I shall like that, because then we shall be teaching each other. It isn't nice to feel that you're the only one who is learning anything ; it makes you feel so all alone.”

“Are you fond of work ?”

The child shook her head.

“No, I'm not ; at least, it depends. When work is like play I can do any amount ; but if it's just work I don't want to do any.”

Molly smiled—actually smiled ; as if she could not help it.

“Do you know, Agatha, that’s exactly how I have felt often and often. It doesn’t seem to do me any good to be too much alone, especially when I am learning anything ; I like someone else to be learning as well. I sometimes feel that it takes two to learn. You and I will learn together.”

“You’ll be a good deal alone here ; I’m afraid you’ll be unhappy.”

“Why ? You little bird of ill-omen ! One can be happy anywhere.”

“Do you think so ? I am not sure. There have been a great many people who did not seem as if they could be happy here. Miss Pickthaw was miserable—she used to cry and cry. I didn’t like her at all.”

“Why not ? Oh, Agatha, poor Miss Pickthaw. Why didn’t you like her ? Perhaps that was why she cried.”

“No, I don’t think so. She didn’t like me either. She used to say that she was a misunderstood woman, and that was why she cried. Do you ever cry ?”

“Agatha ! you mustn’t ask such questions, especially when a person is really rather tired. Oh, dear ! I haven’t changed my frock. Did your mamma send you up ? She said that when I was ready I was to ring.”

“I came up of my own accord ; I wanted to see you. Don’t you think that was natural ? Since I am

the person who will have more to do with you than anybody else, I wanted to know just as much as mamma, and even more, what kind you were. I am glad that you are the kind you are, very glad, because it is such a comfort to feel that I shall like you."

Molly smiled again, as if she could not help it.

"Agatha, I do believe that you're a character. But I must go and change my frock—your mamma told me to. I'll be as quick as ever I can. Will you stay till I come back, or how shall it be ?"

"I'll stay here. If you want to please mamma, you'll put on the ugliest frock you've got. Mamma likes ugly people and ugly clothes. I don't quite know why, but she seems to think they're safer."

The door was opened from without as Molly, still smiling, was about to open it from within, and Mrs. Norris re-appeared, a brown envelope in her hand.

"Miss Mitford, haven't you changed your frock yet ? What does this mean ? And, Agatha, what are you doing here ? Did Miss Mitford ring ?"

"No, she didn't ring ; I came of my own accord. She is just going to change her frock. I daresay she'd have changed it by now if it hadn't been for me."

"Miss Mitford," observed Mrs. Norris, holding out the brown envelope between her fingers, "a second telegram has just arrived addressed to Mrs. Waller at this house. It's a most extraordinary thing that two telegrams should have come here to a person of that name. I suppose you know nothing about a person named Waller ?"

Molly hesitated for a moment, then she lied.

"No, I have never heard the name before."

"This is the first time such a thing has happened in this house. To say the least, it is curious that it should have occurred just after your arrival. Please do as I told you, and go and take off that dress at once."

Molly went. As she ascended the staircase she heard Mrs. Norris speaking to the maid.

"Stockley, give this back to that boy, and tell him that there is no person named Waller in this house, and that we know nothing about such a person; and tell him to instruct them at the post office not to send any more telegrams addressed to such a name."

CHAPTER XIII

CECILIA'S LETTER

THOUGH she was very far from comfortable, Molly might have continued to stay at Acacia Villa, if it were not for two things—fate and Mrs. Norris. As regards Mrs. Norris, one could only say that for her attitude towards the world in general there were extenuating circumstances. In her way she was a remarkable woman. She had had a very hard youth—she had worked with her own hands at a packing bench—nor had the hard time ceased when she married. For years her husband had struggled against adverse conditions; when success began to crown his efforts, his wife became conscious that if she was to rise with him certain changes would have to be made in her equipment. It was too late for her to educate herself in any real sense of the word, but she did what she could. She took lessons from competent teachers in various elementary subjects, and in particular she struggled against her natural inclination to speak the English which was in use among the people in whose midst she was born, and she succeeded to an extent which might almost be called extraordinary.

She had always lived among persons to whom

many of the common decencies of life were as good as unknown. When she went to live in Acacia Villa she resolved that, as she understood them, they were to be the first and last consideration. Hence the painful neatness which obtained in all those parts of the establishment which were likely to meet the public eye ; the order in which everything was done ; the set routine from which, so far as she could, she would allow no one to fall away—she went too far in the one direction, as in her youth she had done in the other. She had been free and easy, and even tolerant enough as a young woman. With age and monetary success she became not only intolerant but jealous to a degree which amounted to disease.

It was this jealousy which, at Acacia Villa, was Molly's undoing. The moment she saw her, Mrs. Norris knew she was a lady, in a sense in which she herself could never be. This would not have mattered so much had it not been for the morbid fashion in which she was continually comparing the girl with herself, and felt that others were doing so, too, especially those who were near and dear to her. She wanted neither her daughters, her husband, nor her son to put this chit of a girl in the scales against her, and find her wanting. On the moral side she trusted her husband implicitly—she would have been more foolish even than she was if she had not done so—but it galled her unspeakably even to notice points in the new governess in which she was conscious that she herself was deficient. She had social ambitions ; she

wanted her son to make what she considered a good match ; she had even the prospective bride in her mind's eye. To think he was offering attentions to a young woman to whom she was paying fifteen pounds a year angered her almost to madness. She hotly resented her eldest daughter's allusions to the governess's pretty figure, her good style, the nice way in which she carried herself, her soft voice—to any of her good qualities, in fact. She wanted to keep Molly in the background, to treat her as a sort of automaton whose duty it was to minister in certain ways to her youngest child. She wanted others to treat her like that also. When she found that they were not doing this, the atmosphere became stormy—and Molly suffered.

Of course, Molly was unhappy ; unhappier even than she had been before she came to Acacia Villa. She had thought that no one could be unhappier than she was then. In this she was wrong, as she herself was presently to learn. Unhappiness is a bottomless pit, whose depth no one ever yet has plumbed. She asked very little from life, or she thought she did ; she only wanted to be allowed to earn her daily bread. If people would leave her alone and let her do it, she would be so thankful. But this people would not do. She had trouble enough in the house, to say nothing of those which threatened from without. Nothing had been heard of those two telegrams. What had they contained ? Had they been returned to their senders ? What had become of them ? No other communica-

tions addressed to Mrs. Waller had reached Acacia Villa, yet she had an uncomfortable feeling that all the while she was being watched. If only Mrs. Norris had been the sort of person in whom she could have put her confidence she would gladly have done so. She knew quite well that Mrs. Norris was watching her as a cat does a mouse, and would seize the very first excuse to devour her.

Then the family hope and pride, as Cecilia had called her brother, was such a trial ; so absurd, so cruel, so cowardly. She had been in the house but three days when she found under her pillow a proposal of marriage—from Bill ; a letter written on four sides of a sheet of paper, in which he poured out his soul in a manner which would have made her shake with laughter had it not instead made her shake with dismay. He sent her presents—she found them in the school-room, in her sewing, beneath the quilt in her bedroom. She dared say nothing. To have discovered him to his mother would have meant short shrift for her. He never spoke to her in the house ; he confessed in his epistles that his mother had forbidden him to do so, and that he dare not disobey ; but he was continually imploring her to make an appointment outside the house, in some country lane which he named, right on the other side of the town. His letters she destroyed as fast as she had them ; what to do with his presents was beyond her altogether. She could not return them to him herself, she had no chance ; still less could she ask others to return them on her behalf.

So she hid them in her tin trunk, conscious that he misunderstood her motives in keeping them, and that he was probably taking it for granted that they were not unwelcome.

Her mind was never at ease; she could not sleep at night, over-tired though she was; she felt as if she were sitting on a volcano which at any moment might break into eruption and destroy her. Then there was Harry Drummond. She had letters from Miss Jane Whiting, who informed her that that gentleman was, metaphorically, like a roaring, raging lion. The way in which he spoke of Molly shocked Miss Jane. She believed that if he found out where she was he would rush straight off to Leicester and behave madly.

Molly carried the letter in which Miss Jane spoke of his singular deportment next to her breast. She read and re-read it till she knew it off by heart. This violent young gentleman was more in her thoughts than she would have cared to own; and each time she prayed she prayed for him. It was easy to understand her mental attitude when she asked God to make him happy, strong, good, to keep him out of the way of temptation and preserve him from evil. She asked many more things for him than for herself—all sorts of blessings. She begged Miss Jane not to let so much as a hint of her whereabouts, and she underlined her request four times. If he were to come to Leicester, she told Miss Jane, and one never knew what he might do, it would, from all points of view,

be dreadful, and she was afraid to think what might happen.

Oddly enough the immediate cause of her dismissal from Acacia Villa was Cecilia. Her mother had forbidden her to have any intercourse with the governess as she had forbidden her brother; yet Cecilia did occasionally come into the schoolroom when she knew her mother was out, and, in spite of Molly's reiterated requests, would persist in showing her the skeletons which were in the family cupboard.

One morning as Molly was starting out with Agatha for their usual walk, Miss Norris stopped her as she was going down the stairs and said :

" You'll see a letter on the schoolroom table. I wish you'd get a stamp for it and post it—there's a penny for the stamp."

She slipped a coin into Molly's hand. As she was dressed for out of doors, Molly wondered why she did not post it herself. She found the letter in question on the schoolroom table, and as she had one of her own to post, she took the two together. As soon as she and Agatha had left the house she became aware that a man was following them; a man whom she had noticed only a few days before with an uncomfortable qualm. On that occasion he had been on the other side of the street when she came out with her pupil, and the moment they appeared he had hurried away. She caught only a momentary glimpse of him—he went one way and

they another. Yet she had a feeling that she had seen him somewhere before ; she could not think where. So uneasy had she been that if she dared she would have cut their walk short at the very beginning, and have returned at once ; but she did not dare. Mrs. Norris's rules were not to be broken ; it was one of her rules that she was to walk with Agatha, if the weather was not impossible, each morning from twelve till half-past one. Once or twice, when she had come in a few minutes before or after she had heard of it.

She felt sure that this man who was following them now was the one who had seemed to evade them a few days ago. She did not venture to look round ; she was conscious of a most curious reluctance to run the risk of a possible recognition. There was a post office in a turning off the road in which the Norrises resided ; she had meant to post her letters there ; with this man behind her she was afraid to enter the grocer's shop in which the office was, lest she should find him waiting for them when they came outside.

"Aren't you going to post your letters," Agatha asked, "or would you like me to ? "

She shook her head ; she could not trust herself to speak ; she was straining her listening faculties to catch the sounds of steps behind her.

"You know," the child continued, "there isn't another post office for ever so far, and mamma doesn't like us to go down into the town."

Molly was aware of that ; the localities in which they were allowed to take their walks were prescribed. She was forbidden to take Agatha where there were shops, or to look in their windows if by accident they came upon any.

"This," persisted the child, when her governess pressed silently on, "leads right into the town ; there isn't another post office till we get there." They were not destined to get so far as another post office. Suddenly Mrs. Norris came into sight, advancing towards them. "There's mamma, she's sure to want to know what we're doing here, and where we're going."

Agatha's instincts proved correct. Mrs. Norris questioned them on those identical points the moment she reached them.

"Miss Mitford, what are you doing here ? Where are you going ? You know I have forbidden you, when you are out with Agatha, to come this way."

"I'm going to post these letters."

In her anxiety about the man behind, Molly spoke falteringly. Mrs. Norris observed her with suspicious eyes.

"Post those letters ? Why, you must have just walked right past the post office. Where are you going to post them ? If you will give them to me I will see that they are posted."

Almost before she knew it, Mrs. Norris had taken the letters from her. She was listening with all her might. The sound of the footsteps had ceased ; what had become of the man behind—what was he doing ?

It was only when an exclamation broke from Mrs. Norris that she became conscious of the scrutiny to which that lady had been subjecting the envelopes she had been carrying.

"Miss Mitford, how did you get this?"

Molly started; the lady's tone was so unexpectedly sharp. She then observed that Mrs. Norris was looking at the letter which Cecilia had requested her to post for her.

"That is the letter which Miss Norris asked me to post for her, because she happened to have no stamp, I think. She put it on the schoolroom table, and here is the penny for the stamp."

"So, Miss Mitford, you are in league with my daughter against her mother? That explains your guilty looks. Your conscience betrays you. You'll be so good as to return with me at once. Agatha, take my hand. Miss Mitford, walk beside me."

What the lady meant, or what was the cause of her sudden and too obvious indignation, the girl had not the faintest notion. She turned to fall in at the lady's side, and, as she did so, she found herself face to face with the man who had followed them. He was only a few feet from where they were, having apparently paused as if to accost them. When Molly saw him, she stared for several seconds, with a look of amazement on her face which grew greater and greater, as if at first sight she could not realise who it was that she beheld. When recognition dawned the expression on her face became one of terror. She reeled as if her knees were

bending against her will. If Mrs. Norris had not caught her by the arm she might have fallen.

The man gazed at her with a sort of hunger in his eyes. When she stumbled he started forward as if to catch her, then, as if all at once changing his mind, he went rapidly past, and without glancing behind, walked quickly down the street.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO STRANGERS

“COME this way, if you please, Miss Mitford ; I wish to speak to you at once. Agatha, you mustn’t come ; occupy yourself in the dining-room until I send for you.”

Mrs. Norris led the way to the schoolroom. She had not spoken a word on the way home. She was obviously prepared to make up for her silence now that she had regained the sacred precincts of Acacia Villa. She did not sit down, nor did she invite Molly to sit down either. She stood on one side of the table, the girl on the other. The contrast in their bearing could hardly have been greater. Mrs. Norris, stiff, rigid, bristling with the desire to find vent for her anger ; Molly, quiet, white-faced, puzzled, nervous, looking as if she desired above all things to avoid a scene. The elder woman, on the other hand, was plainly spoiling for one.

“Who is that man you stared at like that ?” She hurled the question at the girl in that domineering tone in which she did hurl questions. Molly had learned that one of her best weapons of defence was, whenever she could, to keep silent. She kept silent then, but the other was not to be denied. “I insist

upon your telling me who that man was. Who was he?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"You would rather not tell me! You behave in a public street, in my child's presence, like a wanton creature, and then you talk to me like that! There's some disgraceful connection between you, of that I'm sure. You will give me a full and satisfactory explanation, or I shall not allow you to come near my innocent child again. Who was that man? What has he to do with you, that at the very sight of him you are so frightened that you almost fall to the ground? Who was that man? Tell me this moment."

Mrs. Norris banged her clenched fist on the table, but Molly continued still. Some of the veneer with which Mrs. Norris had managed to overlay the original woman began to come off, as it was apt to do when she became excited.

"So that's how you're going to treat me, is it, miss? You won't speak? Don't try any of your fine lady airs with me. I don't believe you're any better than you ought to be, anyhow. I'll find a way of making you speak before I've done with you. But there's something else I want to say to you first. What do you mean by leaguing yourself with my daughter against me?"

"I don't know what you mean; I have done nothing of the kind."

"Then what's this?"

"I have already told you that that is a letter which your eldest daughter gave me to post."

"You know perfectly well that I've forbidden her to write to the man."

"Write to what man? I assure you, Mrs. Norris, that I don't know what I have done to make you angry."

"Don't you treat me to any of your smooth-tongued speeches. You know perfectly well who this letter is to."

"I do not; I have not the least idea."

"You have the face to tell me that when there's the name and address on the envelope—you can read!"

"I am not in the habit of reading the name and address on the envelope of a letter which I have been asked to post."

"Oh, aren't you? What fine notions you have and what a fine fool you must take me for to think that I believe you! You've no right to post a letter for my daughter."

"I could not tell that you objected to my doing that."

The girl's calmness seemed to make the woman more excited, as if galled by the consciousness of how unfavourably her demeanour compared with the other's. She seemed to be just on the point of breaking into one of those outbursts of rage, for which she was famous, or infamous, when the door opened and Cecilia entered. When she chose, the daughter could be a

match for her mother on her own ground; she seemed disposed to prove it then.

“What’s the matter now, mother? Agatha tells me——” She caught sight of the envelope in her mother’s hand. “Give me my letter!” In a moment she had snatched the envelope away.

“Cecilia, give me that back! Give me that back, I tell you! You give it me back!”

Mrs. Norris made as if to enforce her command, but Cecilia was the quicker. Putting the length of the table between her mother and herself, she tore the envelope into shreds.

“I’ll have you to know, mother, that I’m of an age at which you’ve no more right to interfere with my correspondence than I have with yours. I tell you quite plainly that if you take liberties with my letters I’ll return the compliment the very first chance I get.”

“You dare to talk to me like that in the presence of this woman! Didn’t you yourself promise me that you wouldn’t write to Joe Burney?”

“I did not. I told you distinctly that I would write to him as many letters as I chose, but I did promise that I wouldn’t post them; that is why I asked Miss Mitford to post this one for me.”

“Miss Mitford shall never have a chance of doing so again. I’ll teach her to league herself with you! She leaves my house this day.”

“What for? Mother, you are outrageously unfair. Miss Mitford has done nothing for which you’ve any

right to blame her. I am to blame if anyone is, she isn't. Suppose I had asked her to post a letter for you, and she had refused, you'd have scolded her for that."

"I will not have you, Cecilia, talk to me like this, especially, as I have told you, in the presence of a stranger. This is my house, not yours ; I alone am mistress here."

"If papa would only make me a reasonable allowance, you could have the house to yourself, mother, as far as I'm concerned."

"You wicked, ungrateful child ! I'll take care your father does nothing of the kind. He shan't give you a penny ; he shall make your allowance less instead of more."

"Then I shall do what Miss Mitford has done, go as a nursery governess ; I am fit for nothing better. I hope I shan't find such a mistress as she has, and I hope, for her sake, that she hadn't such a mother. It's mothers such as you who drive girls to desperation."

"Cecilia !" In her agitation, Mrs. Norris swept a little pile of books off the table. Something was revealed beneath them on which her glance fastened. "What's that ?" She picked it up. It was a small parcel, on the exterior of which a tradesman's address was printed. "From Hetherington, the jewellers. What is the meaning of this ?"

"Mother, that isn't yours. You have no right to open a parcel which isn't intended for you."

"When I ask you what is and what is not right for me to do, then it will be time for you to tell me."

Mrs. Norris's tone was grim. She was opening the little parcel. A jeweller's leather-covered case came out of the paper wrapping. She took out a card on which some words were written.

"My son's handwriting. 'To Molly from Bill. Please wear this once to show that you like it.'" She took out of the case a slender gold chain to which a small pendant was attached, and held them up between her fingers. "So this is how his money is spent, and why he's always telling me he's short. Of all the incredible wickednesses ! You unspeakable creature !"

To judge from the way in which she was regarding Molly, it would not have needed much to make her resort to actual physical violence. Indeed, she owned as much.

"I should like to break a stick over your back ! I'll learn you !"

"Mother !" The door had opened a second time to admit Mr. William. The young gentleman still had his hat, stick, and gloves in his hands, as if he had come straight up from the street. "Agatha told me there was something going on up here, so I thought I'd come and see what it was. That is not yours, mother, which you have in your hand. Give it to me."

Mrs. Norris seemed about to break into a torrent

of angry words, then to make a great effort to restrain herself.

"William, Cecilia, come with me, I wish to talk to you in private. Miss Mitford, I will see you a little later."

* "Mother, before you go, you will please give me that necklace."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, you wicked, ridiculous boy. Now, William, don't make me angrier than I am already. I insist upon your coming with me without another word."

"I am not going with you, mother, until you give me that necklace."

"What will you do with it if I do let you have it ?"

"I am going to give it to Miss Mitford, for whom it was intended."

"Do you think I'll allow you to make that creature presents before my eyes."

"Moderate your language, mother, if you please. Remember you are speaking of a lady who is very near and dear to me. I trust to make Miss Mitford my wife if she will so far honour me ; I have already told father, and now I tell you. Please give me that necklet."

Mrs. Norris threw up her hands as if to call heaven to witness her troubles.

"Both my children are stark, staring mad. That they should ever treat me like this ! But I will have you both to know that I am not yet in my dotage, and that while I can I will defend you from the consequences of your own mad folly. William, open that

door for me and let me go ; and you will come with me, and Cecilia also."

Before Mr. William could obey his parent the door opened a third time—to admit a maid bearing a brown envelope upon a salver.

"There's another telegram, ma'am, for Mrs. Waller." I told the telegraph boy that there wasn't anyone of that name here, but he said I'd better go and see."

"There's some mystery about these telegrams. It's incredible that anyone can keep on making such a mistake. Stockley, give that to me. After what I've seen this morning I'm going to leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of what I've only too much reason to fear is some disgraceful story. As mistress, I am entitled to open all the telegrams that come to this house, and there certainly is no one here of the name of Waller.

"Excuse me, I am Mrs. Waller."

The girl came forward, looking like one who was driven to bay and taking her courage in both hands. Mrs. Norris stared at her aghast, as indeed Mr. William, Cecilia, and the maid did, too.

"You are Mrs. Waller ?"

"That is my name. Please give me that telegram."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, you barefaced hussy ! Didn't I hear you with my own ears say that you knew no one of the name of Waller, and didn't Miss Whiting tell me that your name was Mitford, and now you have the assurance to stand there and tell me that you entered my house under false pretences and with a false name. I never, never heard of such

impudent, such astounding audacity ! I suppose that next you will want me to believe that you are a married woman."

"I am, I am sorry to say ; through what can hardly be called any fault of my own."

"You are sorry to say ! Through no fault of your own ! What manner of person have I been harbouring in my house ? Mrs. Waller, indeed ! You may have a dozen names, for all I know, each one more shameful than the other. To me you are Miss Mitford, and Miss Mitford you will continue to be during the short time you will remain in this house. You know of no Mrs. Waller. You yourself said so, and I know of none ; of that I am quite confident. I shall therefore open this envelope to see why such messages continue to come to a person of whom no one in this house knows anything."

Mr. William checked her, even as her finger was on the flap of the envelope.

"I am very sorry to hear what this—this lady says, but as she says that she is Mrs. Waller, and that that telegram is intended for her, I do not think mother, that you should open it."

"I shall open it, whatever you think—so there ! It's a pretty state of things when children begin to talk like that to their own mother."

She was as good as her word. She tore the envelope open, taking from it the familiar pink sheet of paper.

"What does this mean ? Of all the extraordinary

messages." She read it aloud: "'To Mrs. Waller, Acacia Villa, Leicester.—You are spotted. They are after you. If you take a friend's advice you will do a bunk before they take you.' If, Miss Mitford, you are the Mrs. Waller for whom this telegram is intended, perhaps you will be able to say what it means better than I can. I do not pretend to be ignorant of slang, but by whom are you spotted? Who is after you, and why are you advised to what your correspondent calls 'do a bunk' before who takes you? One might think that you were wanted by the police. I hope that that is not the case. No policeman has ever been in this house, and I trust one never will."

Before Mrs. Norris had quite done speaking, a further interruption occurred. Two men, who had apparently shown themselves up from the front door, came into the room. The one in front carried his hat in his hand, the second kept his on his head. It was the foremost who spoke.

"I'm sorry, madam, to disappoint you. I couldn't help hearing what you said about hoping you'd never have a policeman in this house, as unfortunately I've got to, because both me and my mate happen both to be policemen—plain clothes men that is. Is there anyone in this house of the name of Waller?"

"Waller? Mrs. Waller?" as she mentioned the name the lady of the house shrank back as if someone had dwelt her a blow.

"I said Waller, madam, but nothing about Mrs.

though I'm given to understand that the person we're looking for calls herself Mrs."

"What do you want with Mrs. Waller?" This was Mr. William, who had thrust himself in front of the foremost stranger.

"Never mind what I want with Mrs. Waller, my lad. You mind your own business and leave other people to mind theirs. Boys should keep themselves in their proper places. Are you Mrs. Waller?"

The stranger addressed Cecilia. Mrs. Norris pointed to Molly.

"This woman has just now said, in the presence of us all, that she is Mrs. Waller."

The stranger turned to Molly; voice and manner were alike curt and harsh.

"Then in that case you're my prisoner. I arrest you for embezzlement and fraud. It is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. If you take my advice you'll say nothing. As you're a woman we don't want to use the handcuffs if we can help it; you give me your word that you'll come quietly, we'll make things as easy and as comfortable for you as we can. I have a cab at the door. I'm not going to trust you out of my sight; you must come at once. Someone can get your hat, and you can put it on as we go."

CHAPTER XV

MOLLY'S WELCOME

To use a familiar phrase, had a bombshell exploded in the schoolroom at Acacia Villa it could scarcely have had a more startling effect on the persons therein assembled than the words and attitude of the man who had his hand, in such ominous fashion, on Molly's shoulder. Molly's own dominant feeling, in the first instant, seemed to be one of surprise. She looked at the speaker as if he had said some incredible thing which was wholly beyond her comprehension. Then with an effort she said :

“I don't know what you mean. What do you want with me ? Who are you ?”

“I'm an officer of police, what we call a plain-clothes man ; that's who I am—I've told you that already ; and you know very well what I want with you—I've a warrant for your arrest.”

“For my arrest ? My arrest ! I don't believe it. You haven't, you can't have. Where have you come from ? Who has sent you ?”

“You'll be told all about that at the proper time, you needn't fear. In the meantime, what you have to understand is that you are my prisoner, my lawful prisoner, and, if you're a wise young woman, you'll

just come quietly and make no fuss, or—we shall just put these on."

He took a pair of handcuffs out of his capacious jacket pocket and held them up in front of her. At sight of them she slipped from beneath his hand and scuttled across the room like a frightened rabbit.

"Cecilia, don't let them touch me; don't let them take me away; I'm afraid of them. I've done nothing—I'm as innocent as you are. Don't let them touch me."

"Cecilia!" exclaimed Mrs. Norris, "come away from that abandoned creature at once, and don't let her soil you by her touch." She turned to the stranger. "Do I understand that you are an officer of the police, and that this young woman, who has held an honourable position in my household, is actually a criminal?"

"As to that I can't say. She may be guilty or she may be innocent; let us hope, for her own sake, that she's the latter. I've been sent to arrest her; that's all I know. I've got a warrant in my pocket, and I must do my duty. If you're a friend of hers you'll advise her to come quietly and not give any trouble, or the consequences may be very serious. Can't someone get her hat? Until I've got her under lock and key, my duty won't allow me to let her go out of my sight."

"I'll go and get her hat."

By this time the whole household was standing at the open door, including Agatha. It was she who spoke. Her mother tried to stop her.

"Agatha! — you'll do nothing of the kind." But the child was already gone.

The officer spoke, addressing Molly, who was still standing by Cecilia at the other end of the table.

"Now, young woman, you come here. No nonsense! If you wish to avoid being handcuffed like a common felon you'll give no trouble."

"I suppose, officer," interposed Mr. William, "that you are quite sure that you are not making a very serious mistake, and that you really have a warrant for this young lady's arrest?"

"I don't know who you are, or what right you have to ask me such a question." The speaker took an official blue paper from his pocket. "I'm not going to trust this out of my hands; but if the young woman wants it read I'll read it to her. If you want to do her a good turn you'll tell her that she'd better come quietly. Anyhow, she's got to come, and that's all about it. Are you coming?"

For answer, the girl clung close to Miss Norris, who seemed herself to be in two minds what to do.

"Cecilia! Cecilia! Don't let them touch me! I've done no wrong. I've done nothing. I'm as innocent as you. Don't let him touch me!"

The man spoke to his colleague.

"Anderson, you stand on that other side of the table, and see that she doesn't pass you. I'll soon make short work of her."

There ensued a painful scene. The girl shrieked and

clung to Cecilia. Then, as the man came on, sought to evade him by fluttering down the other side of the room. The second man advanced, made a dash at her, and caught her in both his hands. The girl shrieked as if in an agony of terror, then lay limp in his grasp. She had fainted. Cecilia broke into speech :

“Don’t be cruel to her! Don’t be rough—don’t hurt her. She’s so small, and easily hurt. I don’t know what she’s charged with ; but I will never believe she’s guilty, whatever it is. It’s dreadful that she should be at the mercy of you two great, rough men. Mother, she’s fainted! Come and help her ! ”

The maid Stockley came towards her from the door.

“Let me see what I can do, miss, to help her. I’m as sure that she’s done nothing wrong as I’m as sure of anything. She’s an ill-used, sweet, innocent angel, that’s what she is.” She eyed the two men. “I’ve half a mind to come with you and see that you treat her proper.”

“And I’ve half a mind not to let you take her at all.”

This was Mr. William. Agatha appeared in the doorway.

“Miss Mitford, here’s your hat.”

“That’s the most sensible thing I’ve heard yet,” said the man who acted as if he were the superior officer. “If you people don’t want to get yourselves into trouble, you’ll be careful what you say, and still more careful what you do. We only want to do our duty. The young woman’s innocence or guilt has nothing to do

with us. Our duty is to arrest this young woman and hand her over to the keeping of the proper authorities. If you're her friends and don't want to do her harm, you'll help us to do our duty, not hinder us. Now, missie, where's that hat ?" Agatha advanced with it. "Can't someone put it on for her ?"

"You're not going to take her away while she's still unconscious !"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a common trick for people to go off into fainting fits when they're arrested, especially if there are any of their friends about to sympathise. They soon come to when we've got them alone and they understand that that sort of thing don't pay. However, I don't mind waiting a minute or two to give her a chance of coming to. But I can't wait very long, because, not even to oblige a young lady who means to keep on fainting, do I mean to miss my train."

They did not miss the train—at least, they found a London train standing at the platform in Leicester station. Molly was at once bundled into it; each man had hold of an arm and hurried her on. They led her to an empty compartment. The superior officer spoke to the guard of the train—a coin changed hands—the door of the compartment was locked. Molly was alone with her captors !

The girl was in a state of collapse. She had not been fully restored to consciousness when they had borne her to the cab ; she scarcely seemed to be in full

possession of her senses now they had got her into the train. She sat huddled up in a corner, looking a picture of helpless, hopeless dejection. The train started with a little jerk which, so limp was she, almost threw her off the seat. She remained in the position in which it left her.

The two men looked at each other.

"She looks pretty queer," remarked the one who had been called Anderson.

"I shouldn't wonder if she looks queerer before she's finished," replied the other. He addressed the girl : "Now, young woman, can't you pull yourself together and sit up ? What's the good of making yourself look that sight ? Do you think your do yourself any good by letting all the stuffing run out of you ? Show a little pluck ; don't crumble up like a stuck pig. Sit up."

The girl half opened her eyes and looked at him, and then shut them again—that was all. She made no attempt to alter her position or to say a word. He had spoken loudly enough ; she could hardly have failed to hear ; but there was nothing to show that what she had heard conveyed any meaning to her brain. Anderson said :

"Leave her alone ; let her do as she likes—lie down, or sit up, or any other way. She'll have enough to bear before she's through ; let her bear it her own way." He took a pouch out of his pocket. "Have you any tobacco ? My pouch seems to be empty."

"Your pouch generally does seem to be empty, I've noticed. I don't mind giving you a pipeful from mine. Hope the lady doesn't object to smoking. Perhaps she smokes herself. You haven't got a cigarette to offer her, I suppose ? "

"I have not ; I shouldn't offer it if I had ; I don't believe in young women of her age smoking."

The pair lit up. Each took a paper from his pocket and settled himself to read. It seemed that the train was an express. It ran through station after station, stopping at none. Not a word was spoken till they were nearing London, then the superior officer addressed himself again to Molly.

"Isn't it about time, Mrs. Waller, that you pulled yourself together. From what I've heard of you I thought you had more grit. I didn't think you'd show the white feather quite so quickly ; that you'd tumble all to pieces from sheer funk before the real business began."

This time both his words and their significance reached Molly. She opened her eyes and she sat straight up. She looked as if she had been suddenly awakened from a troubled sleep.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I'm not at all afraid. I've nothing of which to be afraid."

"That's good news. Let's see how long you stick to that opinion. You'll want all the pluck you've got before you're through, perhaps a little more."

"Of what am I accused ? Who has accused me ? Where are you taking me ? "

"We shall be at St. Pancras in less than five minutes. I should say that you'll know all you want to about things in a good bit less than half an hour. Now, how is it going to be—are you coming in a taxi-cab with us without any fuss, or are we to slap on the darbies ?"

"I'll come with you without any fuss."

The girl spoke quietly, with a certain little air of pride, an obvious desire to be brave, which some people would have found pathetic.

"Pipes out." Anderson emptied the ashes out of the bowl of his pipe by knocking it against the open window. "Now my lass, for the final stage—before the very last. You'll perhaps be standing your trial before you think."

The train stopped. The trio descended. With Molly between the two men, as before, they walked along the platform to a cab. Directly the girl was in it she closed her eyes again, as if she could not face the world in such company. Although the cab moved at a high speed for nearly half an hour, she did not open them again until it came to a standstill. The vehicle had drawn up at the door of a house which seemed to be standing in large grounds—a big, detached, old-fashioned house. Molly wondered hazily if they were in the country ; there seemed to be about her the scent of fields.

"Here we are ; get out."

She got out with meek obedience. The door of the house was open ; they led her through it. Directly

they were in the door was closed. A thought seemed suddenly to strike her.

“ This is not a police station ! ” she exclaimed.

“ The police station is at the other end of the passage.”

They moved her on, each still holding an arm, to a door which was at the end of a long corridor. The door was opened ; they led her through. With a curious sensation of surprise she recognised the man who had opened the door. It was the huge, red-bearded giant who had held her in his grip in the hollow among the Shanklin cliffs above Luccombe Chine. The room seemed full of men. One of them said : “ The pleasure of meeting you, Mrs. Waller, is one to which we have long looked forward. We hope you are very well. Hallo ! what's wrong ? ”

For the second time that afternoon the girl fainted.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STORY AS TOLD BY MR. STEINMANN

WHEN Molly came back to consciousness of life she found herself lounging in a great arm-chair, a black-haired, square-faced man kneeling on the floor in front of her, and men all round. The square-faced man seemed to have been acting as ministering angel. He had in his hand a bottle and a glass. When she opened her eyes he offered her the glass.

“ That's better ; don't worry ; take it easy ; drink that.”

Molly took the proffered glass between her fingers —rather in obedience to his wishes than because she wanted it.

“ What's in it ? ”

“ Champagne—Pommery Greno, '04—a drink for the gods. Empty that at one swig, it will buck you up, and you want bucking up ; you are underfed, and under everything ; below par all round. What you want is good food, good drink, a good time—plenty of all three. Now, you do as I tell you, and drink what is in that glass.”

She did as he told her. His dark eyes were bold and searching, his staccato sentences were spoken with a nasal accent and a cold voice ; yet there was some-

thing about him which affected her not unpleasantly. She emptied the glass ; she had not often tasted champagne, and it sent something surging through her veins which brought a touch of colour to her cheeks. The man noted with approval the effect it had had.

"Better and better ; you'll do. If you will put the contents of this bottle inside you, you'll feel another woman—only go slow. I'll fill your glass again, and I'll put the bottle and the glass by your side ; when you feel like it take a sip—or a swig—either will do you good. Now, gentlemen, I think that if a little care is exercised, Mrs. Waller will be found ready for business."

The room was a large one. There was a billiard table in the centre, round which the assembled men had grouped themselves. A grey-haired man sat in the centre of one side. A broad piece of wood, which looked as if it were a leaf out of a large dining-table, had been run across the billiard-table in front of him to serve as a desk. The arm-chair in which Molly sat was turned, without disturbing her, till she faced him on the opposite side.

There were present perhaps fifteen or twenty men ; they seemed to her a great number—men, apparently, of all ages, nationalities, and stations in life. Some were dressed in a fashion which would not have been out of place in Bond Street ; others in odds and ends of shabby garments which had obviously not been made for their present wearers. Some carried their country plainly on their persons ;

there were men whom it did not require much insight to set down as English, American, French, German, Danish; others who had clearly had their birth in warmer climes, possibly in some of the warmer States of South America; there were still others about whom one not only wondered where they had sprung from, but also how they came to be there. But one thing they all had in common —they all had eyes for the girl; they seemed to be drinking in every detail of her appearance, scarcely once did their glances leave her person.

The grey-haired man immediately in front of her seemed by tacit consent to be in charge of the proceedings. His hair, of which he had a considerable quantity, was brushed without any sort of parting straight back from his brow, which was broad and lofty. He wore gold-rimmed glasses of what to her seemed curious construction; she felt that they gave him rather an inhuman appearance. He expressed himself in good English, into which there occasionally crept an idiom or accent which suggested that he was of German nationality. His manner could not have been more suave and courteous; to her mind his very suavity was ominous, being of the kind which one feels may be serving as a screen for something very different.

"My dear Mrs. Waller, permit me, in the first place, to again lay stress upon the pleasure it gives us to have you at last in our midst; our only regret is that you are not, apparently, in such robust

health as so charming a lady has a right to enjoy. To that expression of our sentiments I have to add an apology. Circumstances have compelled us to play you a trick, and for that we ask your forgiveness. At the same time I would point out in mitigation of our offence that if we desired your presence here we had practically no alternative. I do not think you would have accepted an invitation, however warmly it might have been couched, so that, our desire being what it was, we had to resort to subterfuge."

He was a big man, seated on a high chair. He leaned over the mahogany board which bridged the table just where he sat, and spread his hands out towards her with a gesture which might have meant anything.

"We can only hope that our agents, friends we had to employ, have treated you with every consideration that the nature of their task permitted. I trust—I sincerely trust—that you have no complaint to make against them; we should be sorry indeed if they caused you pain."

He spoke in mellifluous accents; pausing as if for a reply. When none came—and one felt by the look which was on the girl's face that she had but a vague notion of his meaning—he drew back from the table and his tone became a little brisker.

"So, the preliminaries being over, let us come to the delicate point which caused us to desire so greatly your presence here. Time is precious. To reach the

heart of the subject in one sentence—you have a husband, Mrs. Waller."

"I have no husband."

Although, seemingly, he had not expected her to speak, she slipped in the contradiction. For an instant it seemed to puzzle him.

"You have no husband? But, pardon me, our information——"

"She means," interposed the square-faced man, "that she hasn't a husband in any real sense of the word—and she hasn't. No girl can look upon a man who has left her at the church door as her husband."

The grey-haired man waved his hand as if he appreciated the point.

"Quite so, exactly; there we are with you altogether, Mrs. Waller; no one can be better aware than we are that the person you know as Jack Waller has treated you very badly."

"I am not sure that he has treated me badly."

The men glanced at each other; on some of their faces lurked a smile, as if they found the girl's small show of spirit amusing.

"No? You can hardly be of the opinion that he has treated you well."

"Perhaps he could not have treated me better than by leaving me when he did."

It was a second or two before the grey-haired man seemed to appreciate her point; when he did there stole over his face a curious smile, which, in the cases

of those about, became a fully developed grin, and in one or two instances a positive guffaw.

"Excellent, my dear young lady, excellent; very neatly put indeed. You've no idea how near the truth you are when you suggest that in leaving you in the way he did he rendered you an actual service. Still, judging by the generally accepted standards, no one can be said to have treated his wife well who behaves to her as he did to you; but—and here is our great point—however ill he may have behaved to you, he behaved much worse to a large number of persons who supposed themselves to be his friends; who treated and trusted him as if he were their friend; who, indeed, placed in him implicit faith, and who have received from him in return treachery which was almost incredibly cool and calculated. We have been considering the matter carefully, Mrs. Waller, and we have decided to place before you a brief statement of our position and Mr. Waller's."

He paused, and, leaning back in his chair, seemed to be searching for words which would adequately express what he had to say. Not a man in the room had seemed to move since he had begun to speak, now there was a slight general movement, as if each were settling himself into his place. Never had speaker a more attentive audience than the grey-haired man when he went on; nor was the girl ever more closely and keenly studied by observant masculines than as she sat up in her chair and listened.

"There are, Mrs. Waller, in this room a good

many of us, and we represent a great many more ; friends, associates, companions, partners in a great enterprise. Not long ago we were banded together in a great work which was to be carried through on a basis of mutual understanding. To be quite frank, we were to bring about a revolution in a South American State, and any spoils which might accrue from our action were to be regarded as common property and divided between us."

The grey-haired man leaned still farther over the table, pressing in turn the tips of his fingers against the board as if he were playing the piano. The men about him seemed to gather a little nearer.

"I won't go into details, which might be tedious as well as—regarding the particular purpose which has brought us here—irrelevant. I will merely say that our enterprise was entirely successful, and that the spoils which resulted from it were very large."

"What do you call spoils ?"

The girl's question seemed to take the grey-haired man slightly aback. Several of the men glanced at him sharply ; then back again at her.

"What do I call spoils ? I call spoils—well, spoils. For instance, what people call the treasury of the country came into our possession, which was considerably over a million sterling in hard cash ; and —other things as well."

"How ?" Again that sharp glance towards the speaker and back to the girl.

"How ? This was a revolution, my dear young

lady, a civil war, a military operation in which we were the victors, and, as such, took possession of what we won ; that is, John Waller took possession on our behalf."

"How came he to do that ?"

The questions which the girl was asking seemed to surprise her listeners, as if the attitude of mind which they suggested was not one they had expected her to take.

"Have you," inquired the grey-haired man, "heard nothing about all this before ?"

"Nothing, not a word. When I stood by Mr. Waller at the altar, I knew nothing about him, of my own knowledge, except that he had asked me to marry him. I know nothing more about him now."

"You knew that he was a rich man ; he had given you, I presume, some proofs."

"I had heard that he was a rich man ; and he has given me what I suppose you'd call proofs."

"Those proofs were given you at our expense, Mrs. Waller ; what he called his riches were ours. Those spoils were entrusted to his keeping ; it was necessary that we should stay behind to continue that military operation ; and it was thought advisable that he should take advantage of an opportunity which offered to carry them to Europe, where he was to invest them in our name ; and then, in due course of time, they were to be divided between us on lines which had been recognised and agreed

upon all along. Well, madam, he went to Europe ; we stayed behind to fight his battles ; the spoils went with him ; it was the last we ever heard of them or him."

He stopped, as if to give greater emphasis to his words. The girl seemed to draw herself up a little straighter in the big arm-chair ; she said nothing. The speaker continued :

"We had perfect faith in him, and everything arranged before he went. He was to let us know when he reached Europe, advise us as to what he was doing with our common property, and let us know what was the exact amount of each man's share. He did none of these things—not one. Instead, he betrayed us in every direction, in every way in which a man could betray his friends. We waited, and when, at the appointed time, no news came from him, we wondered why. We inquired into the reason, and learned that from the very first it must have been his intention to play us false."

The speaker's manner became a trifle warm. He again leaned over the table, italicising his words by tapping with his fingers on the board. All around seemed to be following him with keener interest.

"The ship was bound for London, calling at various ports by the way. At the very first port of call he got off ; yes, he got off, carrying our property with him. It was months afterwards that we found he had left that port in a sailing ship which he had specially chartered, which was bound for an

unknown destination, and of which nothing has been heard since its departure. This, madam, was more than six years ago ; ever since we have been searching for him individually and collectively over the whole face of the earth, and we have not yet found him. We have gained an idea of the height and depth of his monstrous treachery. While we fought, and bled, and starved—more than two hundred of us, madam—he had been leading the life of a multi-millionaire on what belonged to us ; he had assumed a dozen different names ; he was one person in this country, another person in that, and still another in a third ; he has assumed so many aliases that one wonders if he is acquainted with them all himself, and under each of these aliases he is a rich man—yes, a rich man—on what belongs to us, while we go hungry. If I speak warmly do you not hold me excused ? ”

“ I am not acquainted with the facts.”

That this answer was unexpected was shown by the expression which came on the speaker’s face ; and by the sort of start which went all round the room.

“ Not acquainted with the facts ? But I have told you them. Have I not made myself clear ? What do you mean, young lady, by saying that you are not acquainted with the facts ? ”

“ I have only heard your story.”

“ Only heard my story ? My story is the story of these honest fellows.”

"It is the true story." "It is less than the truth." "He has not told you the half." "He has left the worst of it untold to spare you."

These remarks came from different speakers, rapidly, one after the other. The girl, gripping with her small hands the arms of the chair, looked from one to the other of the faces round her. A subtle change seemed to be taking place in most of them; they were growing fiercer. The grey-haired man waited till his associates had ceased their dropping fire of comments, then he said, if possibly, even more suavely than before :

"Will you tell me what you mean when you say that you have heard my story only? Will you please to explain?"

The girl seemed to hesitate for a moment; then said, with her head held very erect, an odd gleam in her beautiful eyes :

"You might not like it if I did."

"Pardon me, I do not follow. We might not like it if you did what?"

"If I were to tell you exactly what I mean."

"At least do us the honour to try us. You will find that we are all attention."

Still the girl hesitated; a little tremor moved her lower lip.

"I think I had better not. I do not know what you have brought me here for. You have played me a very cruel trick; shamed me in my own eyes and in the eyes of others. I think that men who could do that to

a defenceless woman might be capable of even worse. Why have you brought me here?"

"To persuade you to do an act of justice, Mrs. Waller."

"I see four men here who waylaid me on a cliff near Shanklin, four men against one girl, who talked to me like that, and who, when I would not do what they wished, nearly killed me. Is that what you propose to do to me now?"

"We desire from you, at the outset, a simple expression of opinion. I will give you ample confirmation of my story if you desire it; but, for the sake of argument, let us take its truth for granted. Do you not think that a man who uses his friends as that man used us has behaved ill?"

"I think—if you insist upon my telling you what I think—that you are probably all of you thieves together."

The silence which followed this candid expression of opinion was so profound that, as the phrase goes, you might have cut it with a knife. Then a hum of voices arose. One exclaimed, "She's a well plucked one!" Another, "She and he are in the game together, that's what it is!" A third, "She's not so innocent as she looks!" A fourth—this was the fat man who had played such a prominent part on the cliff above Luc-cumbe Chine—"I tell you what it is, mates. She takes advantage of her being a female, that's what she does, to bully us. That's what it amounts to. She thinks she, being a female, can say what she chooses and do what

she likes, and we can't touch her, she being of the opposite sex—no, not so much as lay a finger on her. That's the way she played off on us that afternoon you know of ; she's all tricks, that's what she is."

" Well, gentlemen," struck in the grey-haired man, " you will perhaps allow me to remind you that the arrangement was that the conduct of this matter would be left in my hands, at least up to a certain point. That point has not been reached. Will you be so good as to allow me to deal with this matter alone until it has ? "

" Go on, Steinmann. Tell her what it is we want her to do. Don't ask her for an expression of opinion ; her opinions have no interest for us."

This was the square-faced man. He seemed to be regarding the girl as if he found her an amusing study. Mr. Steinmann continued, with a wave of his hand towards the square-faced man :

" Mr. Groves, I take your hint. I will tell this young lady what it is we wish her to do in as few words as it can be told." His tone, when he addressed himself to Molly, was still so suave as to be almost deferential. " I am obliged to you for your frank answer to my question, Mrs. Waller ; we are all of us obliged to you—I speak for the company. But it makes our position a little difficult. You have married the man who has done all these things to us. You are a lady, an English lady, well brought up in the paths of honesty, among ideals, in the atmosphere of a high standard of honour ; yet you are provincial, short-sighted, without experience, knowing nothing of the part which such men as

we play in the making of history. We are not thieves. I know something of every man for whom I speak ; the views of some of us are a little broad compared to those which obtain in an average English parish ; but, in essentials, from every point of view, we are, all of us, honest men. There is not one of us who would behave as this man has done, who has been guilty of another act of treachery in marrying you. You have our sympathy, young lady, though we have not yours."

"Hear, hear!" The exclamation came in more or less subdued tones from several voices at once.

"If we could have found the man who, to you, has called himself John Waller, we should not have played this trick on you, for which we have asked your forgiveness, and on which you have commented in strong terms, which I do not pretend are unjustified. If, as I say, we could have found the man, we should not have troubled you at all. So far as any direct action of ours was concerned, we should have allowed no hint to reach you that such persons as ourselves existed. We should deal with him—we should call him to account. In a very few minutes, if we had him here, our account with him would be settled for ever and a day. But we have not got him here, we do not know where to find him. We were within a hair's breadth of him on the day on which he married you. But he is a devil ; oh, yes, he is a devil! We do not know how he learnt that he was in danger, but he did. At the very moment in which we thought we had him he slipped through

our fingers—vanished, like the thing which the conjuror causes to disappear, the conjuror alone knows where. There is no cleverness of which he is not capable, no trick which he hasn't at his finger ends. It may be yet another six years before we chance on him again, before we even come upon a thing which will show that there ever was such a man. So you perceive, madam, how it is with us ; since your husband takes good care that we shall not deal with him, we are compelled, absolutely compelled—there is no alternative—very much against our wills, to deal with you. We would ten hundred thousand times sooner deal with the man who has played—up to a certain point only—at pretending to be your husband."

The grey-haired man capped his words by striking the board in front of him with his clenched fist ; and at the very instant in which his hand came into contact with the wood a singular interruption occurred. The door at the end of the room was opened and a man came in, who observed, as he was in the very act of entering :

" Is that so, Steinmann ? Then you shall deal with him. Steady, gentlemen, steady ! I have in either hand a bomb, with whose composition you are familiar ; if any man moves, or shows a disposition to be unpleasant, I'll send the whole dear crowd of you to join the saints. It's no good shooting, because if you hit me I shall fall, which will mean that the bombs will fall, and as you're all perfectly well aware, that will be the end of you."

CHAPTER XVII

JOHN WALLER

THE person who had entered was neither very tall nor very broad, and yet no judge of physique need to have looked at him twice to be aware that this was a man of very unusual muscular strength. The very way in which he held himself spoke of a strong man ; one felt that he was like a man that was made of whipcord, all muscle and sinew. His head, which was not very large, in some odd way recalled that of some wild creature on which there was not an ounce of flesh to spare, attached to a neck which was all sinew. This resemblance to a wild creature went farther than the shape of the head ; one could fancy that a tiger converted into a man would have a face just like his. An aquiline nose ; a mouth which in repose seemed almost non-existent, but which, when the man was roused and angry, seemed to be one huge snarl. But his eyes were his most singular feature ; not very large, rather close together, they seemed to change colour with his mood. As he stood there in the doorway, with what seemed to be a ball of crystal held in either hand, they appeared to gleam at the men he confronted, as if within them were actual sparks of flame.

At the moment of his first appearance every man had moved ; there seemed to be a simultaneous inclination which bore them towards the door. The grey-haired man had started from his seat and taken a half-step forward ; the square-faced man seemed as if he were about to bound in the same direction. On every face there had come a look of anger, amazement, desire ; as if, all taken by surprise as they were, their first impulse was to rush at this man like a pack of hounds at a fox. But, when he spoke, despite their rage and longing, prudence prevailed. They eyed those shining globes which he was holding, put a curb on their natural instincts, and, like a pack of hounds watching for a chance to make a rush, stood in strained attitudes, rigid and motionless.

On his side the man eyed them one after the other, his glance passing from face to face with a gleam of recognition as it rested for a fraction of a second on each. When he spoke, his voice had in it a quality which was in keeping with the whole of his appearance, half purr, half snarl. Though at the moment words came from him in velvet tones, one felt that at any second, without an instant's warning, they might be changed for angry yelps and furious screams.

“So ! What a gathering of vultures, ready to pick the flesh off the corpse of the man whom, living, they had feared—you hungry, carrion crew ! You have been looking for me ? Well, here I am. You have sworn to yourselves that you would tear me

to pieces. Here's your chance, why don't you tear ? There's not one of you alone who wouldn't rush right round the world to get himself out of my reach. But now you are not alone, not the greatest coward of you all, you are quite a horde. Why don't you make an end of me, and get it over ? I will tell you something ; you all of you know me pretty well ; I'd like to toss these bombs down in the middle of you if only to see your faces as they were falling, the shadows of the coming hell which would darken them while they were yet in the air ; and for a very little I'd do it too—you know I would. Shall I ?"

He made as if he would toss the globes into the centre of the room. Every man shrank back. Steinmann raised his arm as if to shield his head ; the square-faced man dodged a little down. There was an air as of expectation of some coming disaster. The grey-haired man exclaimed :

" Do not, Isaac, add this to your other crimes."

The velvet tones of the man at the door became all at once a yelp.

" Call me by that name again, Barney Steinmann, and the second after you'll be no more. My name is Waller, John Waller ; do you hear ? Call me by my name or—the bomb. Quick !"

" Mr. Waller ! " With grotesque suddenness the name broke from the other's lips.

" That's better, Steinmann, much better ; never address a gentleman out of his name. Unless to some of you I should happen to be a stranger, how-

ever often we may have met before, permit that I introduce myself. I am John Waller, of Lombard Street and Berkeley Square, and—of various seats in the country—the husband of my wife."

As he turned to address the girl in the chair his whole bearing was transformed ; one understood how, as she said, she had always been afraid of him. Although, to the unobservant eye, he became more a normal man, and even courteous and pleasant, she seemed as he approached her to become conscious of something sinister before which she shrank and withered.

"Molly!" He noted the seemingly involuntary shiver which went all over her as he addressed her by her name ; paused ; then continued in a different tone, with an odd little smile. "You will do me the justice to admit that only on one or two occasions have I ventured to call you Molly ; I beg your pardon if my doing so should cause you the least annoyance. I must endeavour to remember not to do so again. You see, you have no conception how dear the name is to me."

Suddenly he looked up from her towards the man who was on the other side of the table ; his voice changing in a manner which was as remarkable as it was instantaneous.

"Drop that revolver!"

Something fell from the man's hand on to the cloth of the billiard table. "You fool! Don't you understand that if you filled me with lead you'd

commit suicide, and murder your friends—I suppose, at least to their faces, you call them your friends. Of all fragile and delicate things which are ever made, surely you know that these two pretty things which I am holding in my hands are the most easily broken ; that I have only to let them drop to blow you and your friends, this room, this house, to—goodness alone knows where—where do such creatures go when they die ? Has any one of you a soul ? I will attend to you, my fine gentleman, presently ; in the meanwhile I am speaking to a lady—don't any of you dare to interrupt ; and as for threatening me—you fools—haven't you yet learned to know me ! ”

Once more the man was changed, so wholly, with such celerity, that one wondered if he had a series of masks which in a moment he could put on and off at will. He again addressed the girl:

“ I was asking your pardon for what you seemed to think a little liberty which I had taken ; but indeed, if I begin to ask pardon of you, I should have to keep it up—I'm afraid to think how long, for my offences against you are—shall I say as the sand of the seashore for multitude ? I ought not to have married you : we'll grant it. My one excuse is that I could not help it. Some of these gentlemen will be able to tell you that when I desire a thing greatly my desire grows so great that I become its slave, not its master. It drives me, not I it. The first day I saw you——”

He paused; glanced at her again with that odd smile, then at the faces round the room.

"This is a curious place and moment in which to have one's first *tête-à-tête* with one's wife: in the presence of so many gentlemen, all anxious, as they themselves would put it, to call me to an account, and, in the course of doing so, make an end of me; but circumstances are sometimes stronger than we; and this is really the first opportunity I have had—so I take it. You must yourself admit, my dear wife, that my chances to be alone with you have not been many. It will give these gentlemen pleasure, if not quite of the kind they anticipated, if before them all I make public confession of how I fell in love with you."

As he said this, he made to her a slight inclination, and in doing so brought his hands together, in each of which was a crystal ball. As he did so a movement seemed to go all through the room; and Steinmann cried:

"Take care! If they touch!"

John Waller looked at him; then at the suddenly anxious faces; and he smiled, as if in the appreciation of a joke which he had all to himself.

"You are right. If they touch—who knows what may not happen? We, perhaps, should not have time to know; not one of us. I will be very careful—as, in moments of danger, you have cause to know—I am."

He turned again to the girl in the chair, who all the while had not spoken or attempted to speak

but sat with her small hands gripping the arms, looking at him with a face from which all expression had gone but fear.

"On that first day on which I saw you—you remember?—it was on the terrace at Monte Carlo. I was talking to your mother; or, rather, your mother was talking to me, as sometimes she flattered me by making me feel that she liked to do. You never flattered me that way; no, not once. While your mother talked, suddenly there came round from behind a raised flower bed a little girl; the little girl of which in my dreams I think I must have always dreamed; because, in that first moment, already I desired her, even before I had had more than a glimpse of her. When I had had more than a glimpse my desire grew. When I went to bed that night I considered over and over again ways and means by which I could make her mine in the orthodox English way. In some of the countries in which I've lived when a man desires a woman he takes her—in ways which are not always orthodox; in England—no."

He made a quick little gesture, which involved a rapid movement of one of the crystal globes. Each man in the room seemed to move with it; it was wonderful what fascinated eyes they kept upon the crystal balls, which, after all, were not much, if any, bigger than tennis balls. Mr. Steinmann exclaimed, with a degree of trepidation in his voice and manner which he seemed to find it impossible to conceal:

"Had you not better put them down—on the

table—anywhere? You know how easy it is for them to explode; how Folari, by just flicking his nail against one, laid ruin all about him."

"I am obliged to you, Steinmann, for your warning; I will be more careful of them than Folari. I will not even put them on the table—anywhere out of my hands; lest, in the discussion which is about to follow, it should be out of my power to keep them from exploding."

Again he addressed the girl:

"These interruptions are not agreeable to a lover who would make that candid confession which some say is good for the soul. That day, as I have said, I loved you; each day that passed I loved you, I desired you more; and so it came about that I asked permission of your mother to make you my wife. I think she was a little surprised, not altogether agreeably; though she was so good as to say that she was conscious of the compliment I paid her in soliciting the hand of her child in marriage. She is a very cool and a very clever woman, your mother; she gets over disappointment quickly, regarding it as a spur to cause her to make fresh efforts to achieve success—in another direction. And so I married you. They asked me, as is the custom in a certain rank of society, in the West as in the East, what price I would pay, and I told them—what they liked. So I paid them the price they asked, and we were made one—you remember?"

He looked at her as if expecting an answer; then, when none came, went on:

"You will permit me to observe that at this point I enter on my defence. It is partly for that purpose I am here; from the first it is to that I have been leading."

He had been standing quite close to her chair, bending slightly towards her, with the intention, as it seemed, of accentuating the fact that his words, which were audible to all, were addressed particularly to her. Now he drew himself a little back, holding himself straighter, turning himself so that he looked each man in the face, and dared him—separately and collectively—to do his worst.

CHAPTER XVIII

GROVES TELLS HIS TALE

“THESE gentlemen”—the stress which he laid upon what is generally understood to be a term of honour was as though he had dealt each of his hearers a little scratch on the face—“have probably been acquainting you with what they no doubt termed my—I doubt if they used so mild a word—misdeeds. They have probably dared to tell you that I betrayed them, that I have been guilty of all those meannesses and cowardly treacheries of which only a mongrel cur is capable. If they have done this they have lied. You, Steinmann, I fancy, have acted as speaker for them all, you shall occupy the same responsible position again. I am going to put to you one or two questions to which, on behalf of all these other gentlemen, and speaking in their name, you will reply. Am I a coward ?”

Mr. Steinmann rubbed his lips with the back of his hand, as if reluctant to accept the post of speaker which was thrust upon him.

“No one said you were.”

“Am I a coward ? Answer, for yourself and for your friends.”

Mr. Waller’s tone as he repeated his question was

a little raised, ominously. This time the haste with which Mr. Steinmann answered was almost comical.

"No, no, you are no coward. No one has ever said you were a coward; that, at least, you are not."

"Have I ever betrayed you?"

Mr. Steinmann's reluctance to answer had evidently returned.

"That depends upon the interpretation which you give that word."

"Have I ever betrayed you?"

Again as the question was repeated there was ominous significance in the altered tone in which the question was asked. This time Steinmann stood his ground a little better.

"You can drop both of those bombs at once, and blow all of us into a thousand pieces. You will not get from me an answer which can be used to make me look both a knave and a fool. From your own point of view I am willing to admit that you do not consider that you have betrayed us; our point of view is different, that is all."

Mr. Waller looked at the speaker as if he were amused.

"You are not a coward, Steinmann; no one has ever said that of you either; I will do you so much justice; but—you are an impudent rogue."

He turned again to the girl.

"I will give you, in the presence of these gentlemen, the history of the transactions which have taken place between us, with no more words than may be needed."

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favour of his own life and the lives of his friends ; yet he did. Groves, have you forgotten ? "

"I have forgotten nothing—particularly I have not forgotten the bargain which I made with you."

"Nor I ; and never shall. I do not forget the bargains which I make."

"Yet see how you kept your side of it ; in such fashion that for your own sake you hold those two bombs in your hands when you come to intercede with us."

"I do not come to intercede with you ; I carry these bombs to make you understand that I am still master of you all. I told these gentlemen, Mrs. Waller, that to save them from starvation, and perhaps worse, I would take them into my own service."

"You were in as bad a hole as we were. You were beginning to feel that every time you showed yourself you risked—a bullet."

"In that State the ruler of the State always does risk that. He knows from the beginning that he carries his life in his own hands."

"Not in the sense in which you were beginning to know it. How many times have you been shot at ? How often have bombs been thrown at you ? How many times have you changed your kitchen staff for fear of poison ? "

"I offered terms to these gentlemen—terms of employment."

"In the bad times which were coming we were to help save your skin. Your own troops were against

you; your own subjects would have liked nothing better than a chance of flaying you alive. Night and day, death stared you in the face; every hour it was coming closer; we offered you the only possible chance of escape; if we risked our lives you might be saved; without us, no. To save you from what you had done your best to deserve, many of us would have to die—and many of us did."

When the square-faced man paused, Waller ironically motioned him to continue.

"Mr. Groves is telling my story in his own way—I presume to save me trouble. I am willing; let him continue; so far, in essentials, I find myself in accord with him—let him carry my story a stage farther. Yes, Mr. Groves, we are waiting. What next? What else?"

"Your object in aiming at that 'post of honour,' as you termed it to this lady, and in filling it, was the ordinary, primitive one—boodle."

Waller interposed with what seemed to be intended for an explanation.

"By 'boodle,' Mr. Groves, I fancy, means theft; plain, honest stealing."

"Robbery on a great scale. None of your trumpery jobs for which your men in England get sent to penal servitude for life, but plunder on splendid lines. He robbed a whole nation—your distinguished husband, madam—for years. The nation was used to being robbed; they had come to believe that government meant theft; but this was robbery in a degree which

was quite beyond anything they had ever been accustomed to ; so they were becoming conscious of an inclination to resent it. And when that nation does become conscious of such an inclination, action follows shortly after."

The square-faced man had risen from his chair ; and now stood with one hand resting on the back, addressing the white-faced, voiceless girl, as an advocate might a judge.

"I speak in the presence of your distinguished husband, prepared for contradiction on points on which I may be in error ; but I do not think that he will be disposed to differ from me to any serious extent when I say that during the period in which he occupied that post of honour he had accumulated plunder in a fashion, and in quantities, which left his predecessors at the post. But—each position has the defects of its qualities—the very extent of his stealing made it difficult for him to enjoy what he had stolen. He couldn't enjoy it there ; no man of taste could ; and, in that sense, your distinguished husband is a man of taste. His natural desire was to get his booty, or at least an appreciable part of it, with himself, out of the country which promised to be so ungrateful. That was precisely what the natives of the country expected that he would do, and which they strained every nerve to prevent. He might have slunk away in the clothes he stood up in, and after hairbreadth escapes by land and by water have reached some far-off land, to which his

loving subjects might not have thought it worth their while to follow him ; but had he tried to do this with anything about him which was anything, he would have been cut into little pieces before he had left his palace a hundred yards behind him. He knew this perfectly well. Did you not know this ? ”

“ Mr. Groves, my dear wife, tells his story in his own way ; but—still we will let him continue.”

“ Your distinguished husband, madam, is too good. In this position he called us in—that is, these gentlemen and that very much larger body of gentlemen they represent ; he enlisted our services on terms. We were to serve as his personal bodyguard ; to act as escort both to the treasure which he had, with so much labour, accumulated, and to himself. We were to ensure him, no matter what happened to us, a safe conduct to the sea. Both parties quite understood what this would mean ; he knew and we knew ; it would mean that we should have to fight every inch of the way. And we did. We left half our number on the road along which we led him to safety—think of it, half our number. Yet while we carried out to the letter our share of the bargain, he failed wholly to carry out his. Before our bargain was finally struck, a rough estimate was made of the gross amount of the treasure which was in what should have been the national exchequer. He was to take it to Europe, to store it in a certain place of safety ; to advise us when he had put it there ; then all of us who were left were to journey, each

by his own route, to Europe, to assemble in the city of Amsterdam, and there each man was to receive his appointed share. You will perhaps ask me what guarantee we had, simple-minded creatures as we were, that he would carry out his share of the bargain."

Mr. Waller suddenly and abruptly interposed.

"Yes, what guarantee had you?"

"We practically had none, except his bare word."

"That was in the bargain. I told you what I would do. Had you trusted me I would have done it. But not only did you not trust me, you played me false."

"So far as I am concerned I did nothing of the kind."

"You planned to play me false."

"That certainly is not true as it applies to me."

"You split hairs; among so many, if you all set yourselves to deny it, how am I to pick out the ones who actually pulled the strings? You were all in the game together. These gentlemen, my dear wife, in doing what they did, were thinking of themselves alone, not at all of me; they were using me as a cat's-paw to pick their chestnuts out of the fire; and I was to bear the ignominy as well. I suspected their integrity from the first; I discovered what it was that they intended to do in the very nick of time—just in time to prevent their doing it. The ship by which they had arranged that I was to take my passage was commanded by a gentleman

whom they supposed to be their friend ; he was a drunkard—that worst kind of drunkard who babbles in his cups. That first night we were out at sea he told me—or rather, when he was in liquor, he let it slip out of his mouth—that he had arranged with these gentlemen to take his ship to a certain port, and there await their coming."

"I was against that from the first." This was Mr. Groves.

"Were you ? At least you say so. That is between you and your friends, who was for and who was against it. What I know is that it was arranged. When I hinted to the captain as he grew drunker and drunker that I thought he was a liar, he produced papers to prove he wasn't. Oh, they proved it, and more ; they proved that they had done their best to ensure my passing from the frying-pan to the fire, these faithful friends of mine, who were supposed to have risked their lives at a price to save mine. The commander of that ship was, as he had said, to take me to a certain lonely island, where ships of large tonnage seldom or never called and there keep me to await their coming. What was to happen when they came I did not too particularly inquire ; I preferred to meet them under circumstances which suited me better. They had taken the first move in the game ; I took the second. At the first port at which we touched I left the ship, leaving the commander friend dead drunk on board ; had I not left it, I doubt very much if I should have lived to reach Europe and

tell this tale. Lest they, being born liars, should be disposed to cast doubt on the truth of this that I have told you, I was careful before I left that ship to procure the documents which made their intended treachery quite clear, and I have them now in safe keeping. At the proper moment, that is, the one which best suits me and least suits them, those papers will be produced ; it will be made clear, beyond all possibility of misunderstanding, who it was that played the traitor. I will make a sporting offer : meet me on appointed days at some convenient place, one after the other, and we'll fight till one of us is dead. I'll account for every one of you, though it takes me years to bring the account to a close. It is only when you are horded in battalions that you dare to meet me face to face. You misbegotten curs that sold yourselves to both sides—to fight with me and against me. You hireling hounds that trade in murder, and, having done your filthy work, would murder him who hires you."

There was in the man's attitude more than a suggestion of the wild beast about to spring—his head held back, his body a little arched, his hands raised, a crystal ball in each. The men, as they confronted him, drew closer together, seeming to brace themselves against the coming storm.

But for the moment the terror with which they were threatened did not burst upon them. Waller spoke to the girl.

"Mrs. Waller, I have come to fetch you home.

The girl eyed him as if she did not grasp his meaning. "I have a home to which to take you. Were I to offer you my arm, something might happen to these very delicate toys which you see I am holding. Might I trouble you to rise from that chair, to which you seem to be glued, and come with me? Stand up."

When she showed no signs of acting on his invitation he snapped out a command. As if automatically, she obeyed him, getting on to her feet as if she had been impelled by springs. He was pleased to approve of her prompt obedience.

"That is better, more in accordance with the old-fashioned English teaching which holds that it is for the husband to command, the wife to obey. Am I to command again, or will it be enough for me to express a wish that you should come with me to the door? You see I am in a delicate position; if I turn my face from them, each one of these hounds will have his shooter out and fire promptly; but I am consoled by this reflection, that even if they hit me it will be as though they shot themselves, and worse; for if they kill me these bombs will fall, and not a man of them will live to boast that it was his shot that killed me. So they shall have my back to shoot at. Mrs. Waller, will you please to come—now."

The girl went; the man turned; side by side they moved towards the door. The instant his back was towards them a dozen hands felt for hidden weapons. The man with the grey hair held them in check; with a movement of his hand he warned them to

control their zeal ; all eyes were on the shining balls which swayed slightly as their bearer moved ; the search for weapons went no farther.

When they reached the door Waller said :

“ May I trouble you, dear wife, to open ? As you see, my hands are otherwise engaged.”

She did as he requested. He stood in the open doorway and faced the men within.

“ Gentlemen, I will not say farewell, but—until we meet again. Let me advise you not to follow us too closely as we go, or you may follow us to your own destruction.”

Mr. and Mrs. Waller passed from the room to the front door of the house. Without was a taxi-cab—not the one which had brought her, but another. The driver was on his seat.

“ I am afraid,” said Waller, “ that for reasons with which you already are acquainted, I shall not be able to usher you to your seat as I should like, but that I must again seem so discourteous as once more to trouble you to open the door ; this time, if you please, dear wife, the door of the cab.”

He followed her into the vehicle. When he was in he observed to the driver in a loud voice :

“ Take us back to town—to Trafalgar Square.”

He still stood up ; as the vehicle started he climbed on to the seat. As they were quitting the grounds in which the house stood, and were at a distance from it of perhaps fifty or sixty yards, he threw one of the balls he held and then the other.

Each as it fell was followed by an instant, ear-splitting clamour, as if some monstrous thunder-cloud had burst just over their heads. The taxi slowed, as if the driver were not unnaturally taken aback by the dreadful sound. Mr. Waller, descending from the seat, shouted at him in tones which he could not help but hear :

“Go on, my man ! don’t look round ! Drive like lightning !”

CHAPTER XIX

A TELEGRAM FOR LADY LUCY

LADY LUCY MITFORD was still at Aix-les-Bains, in what, for her, was a state of very great annoyance. It was one of the guiding principles of her life never—under scarcely any circumstances—to allow herself to be annoyed, so it will be surmised that, in this especial instance, the provocation must have been very great. It had been. Her luck at the tables had been incredibly bad—continuously bad ; not on the see-saw system, a little up and a little down ; but always lower and lower, and never up at all.

She was practically ruined ; by which she meant that she had lost every penny of ready money. And people were so provoking ! Not only did no one seem anxious to lend, there were some who actually wished her to pay what she owed already. The landlord of her hotel, for instance, had given her a very plain hint that a settlement would not only oblige but was absolutely necessary. Then Colonel Straker-Squire, to whom she was positively resolved she would be engaged before she left Aix, was behaving in the most ridiculous manner with a woman who called herself a widow, a Mrs. Hardinge—at least that was her story—of whom no one knew anything, and

A Telegram for Lady Lucy 213

whose diamonds were obviously as false as her hair.

Lady Lucy was aware that she had the Colonel in a corner—although he did not know it—which he would find it very hard to get out of unless she let him; but, of course, as a self-respecting woman she did not wish him to want to be out of it, and he was certainly showing signs. This, that, and the other were hard enough to bear, but the crowning blow of all came from her relatives. She realised that she was not able to keep people out of Aix-les-Bains merely because they were her relatives; she was not sure, even, that she particularly wanted to; as a rule they were rather a help than a hindrance. But on this occasion they were, in her estimation, simply awful.

Lady Henshaw had asked her to tea at the Bernascon. When she got there, and they began to show her to a private sitting-room, she would have liked to turn tail and run, because she suspected that if she was to be offered the cup that cheers in a private sitting-room it was for reasons. But her suspicions fell short of the reality. When she got into that sitting-room she found, although it was a fairly large one, that it was as good as full of her relatives, and she knew, on the instant, that she was in for it. Lady Henshaw began at her at once, with a sister's directness.

“I've just learnt, Lucy, to my utter amazement, that not only is your child not with you, but that you don't even know where she is.”

The Henshaws had only arrived the day before. The invitation to tea had reached her that morning. She had accepted it as the lesser of two evils. Now she was not sure that she had not chosen the greater after all. The Countess of Petersfield joined herself to Lady Henshaw.

"We are all of us amazed—not only your relatives and friends, but even casual acquaintances. It's a subject of common talk. I cannot but feel that you have been avoiding me because you did not wish me to speak to you upon the subject. I have been at Aix ten days, and you have not been to see me once. I cannot tell you, Lucy, how strong my feelings are."

"My dear Sarah, I called on you when you were out."

"You called on me when you knew I was out, and you left no message. I have written to you twice and you haven't even answered. I have called on you three times—whether you were in or not I cannot say. I was not even admitted to your rooms."

"I only have a bedroom."

"I was refused admission to your bedroom."

"It is little more than a stuffy cupboard ; I don't know what you would have gained if you had been admitted."

"Is it possible that you don't know where your child is ?"

"It is not possible."

"You do know."

“I do.”

“Where is she ?”

All the relatives pricked up their ears as they waited for the answer. They pricked them up still more when it came. Some of them even jumped ; if they had been holding teacups they might have let them fall. The matter-of-fact way in which Lady Lucy said it made it particularly dreadful. She might have been making a statement which they all of them expected.

“She is in a situation as a governess.”

The cries which arose !

“As a governess ! Lucy ! Are you in earnest ? Molly in a situation as a governess ! You must be joking !”

“I fancy Molly is ; if she isn’t I don’t know what she is doing ; that is the only explanation I can give. Mabel, I don’t know if this is the hotel tea. I don’t think much of it if it is.”

“Where is the situation in which Molly is in ?”

If Lady Henshaw had reflected she would have seen that her question was rather loosely worded.

“That’s more than I can tell you. How long are you going to stay ? I never knew Aix so dull, even you won’t be able to stand it for long.”

“You say you know where Molly is. You say she’s in a situation as a governess ; then almost in the same breath you tell us you don’t know where the situation is. Do you call that knowing where she is ?”

Lady Lucy sighed. She put her cup and saucer on a gilt-topped table, and drew her handkerchief across her lips. She realised that she was in a position in which evasions would not be allowed to pass ; that she was trapped ; that she would not be released from the trap till she had told these wretched, inquisitive people all they wanted to know ; so, as she was a woman who never hesitated to face facts when she realised that they had to be faced, she let them have it all at once.

" You are all glaring at me as if you thought I had been guilty of a crime ; when, if there's anyone who has been guilty of a crime, it's Molly. Whether the girl's mad I can't say. Is it strange that I should wish to conceal the fact if she is ? The whole affair has been a comedy of errors—or a tragedy, or a farce, or a melodrama—I am beginning to wonder which. On the day of her marriage her husband not only deserted her, she deserted me. She stole out of the house while I was sitting alone making plans for her future ; when I went to tell her what I had been thinking of, I found she was gone."

" You never breathed a word about anything of the kind to us." This was Lady Petersfield, who was sitting bolt upright on her chair, as if she felt that, under the circumstances, a comfortable position was out of the question.

" What would have been gained if I had ? I have suffered enough already—what with the man Waller's conduct and outrage. I didn't want to blaze

A Telegram for Lady Lucy 217

about the fact that I was suffering still more. Besides, I supposed each moment that Molly would return to me; or, at least, that she would let me know where she was."

"What efforts did you make to ascertain where she was?" This was Marmaduke Prideaux, who had come to Aix that very morning.

"I made none."

"Lucy!" This came from all the women present in a sort of chorus.

"Why should I? She left me of her own accord; she knew where I was to be found. She was a rich woman, I was poor. There was nothing she could desire which was not at her command. She knew that I was nearly penniless—I had told her so. I do not say that that is why she left me, but, at least, she made it plain that whatever my necessities might be, not one penny should I ever have from her."

"Had there been a quarrel between you?" This again was Mr. Prideaux.

"No, there had been no quarrel—nothing approaching a quarrel. But I confess that I was not surprised to find that she was gone, although I did not know that she was going, nor had she dropped the slightest hint that she harboured any intention of the kind."

"How long was it before you learnt where she had gone to?"

"I cannot tell you to a day. One morning I had a

letter from a person named Whiting—a Miss Whiting had been one of Molly's governesses ; this Miss Whiting was that Miss Whiting. She wrote a brief, formal note, in which she said that Molly had desired her to inform me that she had been staying in her house, and had now accepted a post as nursery governess in the establishment of a lady with whom she—Miss Whiting—was acquainted ; but that while, at Molly's special request, she withheld her address, any communication which I might send would be forwarded. The whole thing was a sheer impertinence. If the girl isn't stark mad, she must be something worse—that she, my daughter, should direct a person of Miss Whiting's class to send such a letter to her own mother, while taking care not to write to me herself—that she had instructed Miss Whiting to withhold from me her address. The insolence of it ! That Miss Whiting would forward any communication which I might send to my own child ! Could a girl behave worse to a mother than to instruct a third person to send such a message as that ? ” Getting up from her chair, Lady Lucy took her cup and saucer off the gilt-topped table. “ There's the whole story for you as I know it. Now throw all the things at me that you can lay your hands on as if I were to blame for my daughter's bad conduct. Perhaps I may be allowed to help myself to another cup of tea while you are considering what there is to throw. I hope you won't aim crooked when you do start throwing and hit each other instead of me ; you'll find it uncommonly

easy. Now, Marmaduke, why are you looking at me like that? What have you got to say?"

"I am very sorry for Molly; that is all I have to say."

"Thank you; I suppose you are not at all sorry for me?"

"Truthfully, I cannot say that I am very. I can understand your disappointment; but you are so much better able to take care of yourself than that child is. I don't care what the tale of her years is; she is much more of a child than most of the children I have met; as helpless as the most childish of them. God help her; that's what I have to say. I envy you your courage; if I were her mother I shouldn't feel so brave."

"You see, the point is—you are not her mother, and therefore have only the vaguest idea of what you are talking about."

Mr. Prideaux was still looking at Lady Lucy as if he were about to retort, when Sir Penberthy Henshaw made his first remark.

"I am bound to say, Lucy, that to me the whole affair is most mysterious. Why has Molly—what possible reason can she have for taking a situation—any situation—when she has five thousand a year in her own right, to say nothing of access and the right to use her husband's vast possessions? His eccentric conduct has not affected her rights in that respect one iota."

Lady Lucy made a little gesture of acquiescence.

"Penberthy, you have hit the mark, that is exactly my point. She is one of the richest women in England to-day, yet she insists upon behaving as if she were a pauper lunatic."

"I take it that her position is that she declines to touch a penny which comes from the man who is her husband only in name."

This was Mr. Prideaux. Lady Lucy snapped at him.

"Husband only in name! What do you mean by that? How many men are husbands only in name? And if you come to it, wives also? Marriage settlements are marriage settlements; if they are to be rendered null and void by the vagaries of husbands, a nice plight we women shall be in."

General Delaney spoke; he was warming himself by the fire; it was late in September and the afternoon was cool.

"It seems to me that the question is, when does a husband become a husband? Whatever may be the point of view of the Church and the law in regarding Mr. Waller as a husband, if I were in Molly's shoes I'm sure I shouldn't feel as if I were his wife"

"That's all very well," observed Lady Petersfield, "and very fine as far as it goes; but Molly is in a peculiar position. She doesn't hit it off with her mother——"

"I don't think you're entitled to say that, Sarah." This was Lady Lucy.

"She doesn't all the same. You've never cared for

her from the day she was born. But Molly, being in such a delicate position, ought to have shown some glimmering of common sense. When she left those altar rails it ceased to be her mother's duty to keep her, it had become her husband's—she ought to have remembered that. She might have declined, if bent on being a Quixote, to spend the whole of her five thousand a year, or to touch any of her other belongings which, of course, came from him ; but just as he would have been bound, had he been present, to keep her in decent comfort, so he was when he was absent. If Molly had understood her duty rightly she would have seen that he did it. I cannot help feeling that, by what I'm bound to call her pigheadedness, she has placed both her mother and herself in a very invidious position. She had no right, under any circumstances, to take up such a ridiculous position as that of a nursery governess. I had a series of nursery governesses for my children as soon as they were able to walk alone ; and I made it a rule never to pay one of them more than thirty pounds a year."

"I think," observed Sir Penberthy, "that you will find that some nursery governesses are paid even less than that."

"Then it makes it still more absurd that Molly should demean herself by doing anything of the kind. You only have to think of it. Surely no woman in her senses who was acquainted with the facts would accept her as a nursery governess—a person who, the moment she ceased behaving like a lunatic, was in the enjoy-

ment of I don't know how many thousand pounds a year. Absurd; no one would have such a person in such a position. If Molly has such a situation, she must have got it by concealing the actual facts; by deception, misrepresentation; and that's a pretty state of things. It looks to me as if she were one of those persons of whom Shakespeare tells us, who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel."

"Was it Shakespeare who said that?" It was Mr. Prideaux who asked the question.

"For my purpose it doesn't matter who said it, as long as somebody did. I suppose Molly thinks she is doing a very high-minded thing in refusing to touch her husband's money, but overlooks the fact that she is doing a very disgraceful thing in entering a stranger's house under false pretences."

"There's no evidence before us to show that she's done anything of the kind."

"Don't talk nonsense, Marmaduke. Would any sensible, respectable woman engage Molly for such a position if she were acquainted with the facts of the case? She wouldn't do it for the girl's own sake."

"I think Sarah is not very far out. Does anyone want any more tea?"

This was Lady Henshaw. No one did.

"Not one of you has eaten anything, and there are all these hot cakes and things—at least, they were hot once. If I had such a person in the house I certainly shouldn't know how to treat her. You don't want to treat a nursery governess as if she were one of your

A Telegram for Lady Lucy 223

family. What are you to do with her when you know that she is about ten times richer than yourself? I'm afraid that Molly, when applying for her situation, wasn't so frank as such a high-toned young woman ought to have been.

"The question is: What are we going to do now? We can't allow her to continue to be a nursery governess—that's unthinkable. Lucy, have you that person's letter of whom you spoke?"

"Oh, yes, I have it—not here, but I have it. It's at the hotel."

"I believe you said that the person's name was Whiting. Marmaduke, I think you ought to go and interview Miss Whiting."

"It may seem odd, Mabel, but I was thinking so myself. In fact, I was meditating doing so as soon as this conference is ended. I am only passing through Aix—the season's ended, I'm due in town. As soon as I get there I'll look Miss Whiting up, if Lucy will give me her address."

"She lives at Shanklin, in the Isle of Wight, at a ridiculous place called 'The White Cottage.' I had better show you her letter."

"I think perhaps you had. A little judicious pressure should make Miss Whiting apprehend that this erratic young lady's address should not be withheld from those who are entitled to know it. If I once get within reach of the young lady I am hopeful that I may be able to bring her to a more reasonable frame of mind. There's someone knocking at the door."

There was—with rather sudden vigour. Lady Henshaw said :

"I dare say it's the waiter, to know if we've done with the tea. Come in."

The waiter entered. He had an envelope on a tray.

"Pardon, is Lady Lucy Mitford here ?" Her ladyship signified that she was. "A telegram has come for her at her hotel ; the concierge, knowing ~~she~~ was here, sent it on, lest it should be important, as it is a telegram from England."

Lady Lucy took up the envelope which the man held out to her.

"I expect it's nothing of the slightest interest or importance either ; telegrams seldom are."

The waiter, bowing, said :

"The messenger is waiting to know if there is a reply."

Lady Lucy opened the envelope, and with an air of indifference began to read the message which, as is the case with telegrams in France, was on the other side. Scarcely had her eye caught the first word than her air of indifference vanished. She started from her chair, changed countenance, giving signs of the most unusual emotion. When she had read it she actually gave a little shriek. She seemed on a sudden to be half beside herself.

"Sarah ! Mabel ! Marmaduke ! It can't be true ! It must be some wicked hoax ! What does it mean ?"

"Let me look at the telegram, Lucy." Mr. Pridaux took it from her seemingly unconscious hand

A Telegram for Lady Lucy 225

She stood looking about her with vacant, frightened eyes, as if oblivious of her surroundings. As Mr. Prideaux glanced at the telegram an exclamation broke from him. But he retained his presence of mind. He glanced at the waiter. "You can go ; tell the person who brought this telegram to wait."

The moment the waiter had gone, questions came from all the persons in the room.

"Lucy ! Marmaduke ! What does the telegram say ? What is the matter ? What can have happened ? "

Mr. Prideaux was a person who was certainly not easily moved ; yet not one of those who looked at him could doubt that he was under the influence of some nearly overmastering emotion then. When he spoke, something seemed to have happened to his voice ; it was broken and harsh.

"I will read you what the telegram says ; it's—it's not an easy one to read. 'Mrs. John Waller has been arrested for the murder of her husband. Wire instructions. Arthur Rye.' That's—that's a brief telegram in which to convey such—such an item of information."

CHAPTER XX

WHY HARRY DRUMMOND RETURNED TO TOWN

THE reading of that telegram was followed by something very like chaos. In varying degrees, each person in that hotel sitting-room seemed to lose his or her head. Everyone wanted to see the telegram, as if it were impossible to credit its authenticity without seeing it, and having seen it, broke into more or less superfluous exclamations of wonder, incredulity, and horror.

"I can only say," declared General Delany, "that I read this morning's Paris editions of the London and New York papers, from the first line to the last, and there wasn't in either a mention of anyone having been murdered. When was the telegram sent?"

Colonel Adams had the telegram at the moment; it was he who answered.

"Let me see; these confounded foreign telegrams always do bother me. So far as I can make out, it doesn't give the office of dispatch, but it was sent from London at 2.37. We are later than London, aren't we?"

No one enlightened his ignorance. Lady Petersfield broke into a string of remarks which bore no relation to anything he had said.

"What I can't make out is, what Mr. Rye thinks he is doing by using half a dozen bare words to communicate to us a fact of that kind. The man's a fool. How does he suppose that we're to know what he means? He's aware that we're in a foreign land, and that news takes a time to reach us. Surely he must have sense enough to guess that we may know nothing of what has happened to Mr. Waller, or to Molly, or to anyone. Why on earth can't he be more communicative instead of trying to save his money?"

"It is always possible, I should say that it was probable, that the whole thing is a hoax."

This was Sir Penberthy, who had taken the telegram from the colonel, and was turning it over and over, as if he thought he might find on it something which would dissolve the doubt he himself had raised. Mr. Prideaux spoke next—he was writing on the back of an old letter with a lead pencil.

"Of course, there's always that possibility; let's hope it is a hoax; we shall soon know. I'm wiring a query to Mr. Rye." He turned to Lady Lucy, who seemed to be less affected than astounded. "Lucy, I'm going to send this wire at once: 'To Arthur Rye, Great Marlborough Street, London,—Lady Lucy Mitford has just received telegram as follows: "Mrs. John Waller has been arrested for the murder of her husband. Wire instructions. Arthur Rye." Wire at once if genuine, giving details. Do not understand; suspect a hoax. Reply at once,

as if telegram received is genuine I shall leave Aix with Lady Lucy Mitford to-night for London. Marmaduke Prideaux. Hotel Bernascon.' It's verbose, but I think it expresses what I wish to say; better send a word too many than one too few. Is there any alteration you would like to make, or anything you would like to add?"

Lady Lucy shook her head. She did not directly reply to his inquiry.

"It will be frightfully inconvenient for me to leave Aix-les-Bains to-night."

"If you prefer it, I will go alone. Is that the only comment you have to make on the telegram I propose to send?"

Mr. Prideaux's tone was dry. Her ladyship seemed to be absorbed by reflections of her own.

"The telegram is all right. It's easy for you to talk of dashing to London at a moment's notice, but—for me it's not so easy."

She was thinking of her empty pockets; of the bill she owed at her hotel. She would certainly not be allowed to take away her luggage till it was paid. What she called her luggage comprised practically all her worldly possessions. Then there was Colonel Straker-Squire; he was a gentleman who liked things done in order, at leisure. She was engaged to dine with him that night—the result of a little manœuvre; she happened to know that the dinner had been ordered—she had practically ordered it herself. If she dashed off in the unceremonious fashion Mr. Prideaux's

words suggested, and left the colonel to eat his dinner—which was her dinner—alone, he would not easily forgive her. She might abandon hope in his direction—it would be tantamount to giving up the siege. And that objectionable Mrs. Hardinge—he might ask that very dangerous woman to take her place at dinner. In the course of a *tête-à-tête* dinner with her what might not happen? Lady Lucy had meant that something should happen if she had been the other diner—that creature who called herself Hardinge might bring that something about instead. If the wretch were to send her a card for the wedding—which might have been her own! Within, her ladyship writhed at the thought. Was this exasperating child of hers always to stand in the way?

She could scarcely give these thoughts of hers audible utterance, so when she reiterated her reluctance to leave Aix-les-Bains at a moment's notice, she allowed her relations to draw what conclusions they pleased. They might, if they liked, set her down as still further lacking in the maternal qualities, but, if she could, she would postpone her departure till the morning. She would not leave that old man, whose wealth made him a mark for every adventuress, at the mercy of that designing, dangerous woman; at least until she had dined with him herself. She pressed the tips of her fingers into the palms of her hands. She was sure that before dinner was done she would bring him to a point at which he would think that she was the one thing in all the whole wide world that he desired.

All the same, she did not want to have any bother over these kinsfolk of hers—with their censorious eyes fixed on her. If only that telegram was a hoax!

But the telegram was no hoax. Later Mr. Prideaux received an answer to his inquiry :

“ Telegram as quoted came from me. Regret that it is inadvisable to telegraph details. Essential that some person authorised to act on the lady's behalf should come to London at once. Magisterial examination in the morning. Mrs. Waller in a state of collapse. Very advisable that friend should see her at once.—ARTHUR RYE.”

When that telegram was shown to Lady Lucy Mitford she felt that from every point of view she was in the most difficult position she had ever known in all her life. It seemed to her that she would have to choose between herself and her child. If Colonel Straker-Squire was not brought to the sticking-point before he heard of Molly's plight, he probably never would be. What would be gained by throwing away her only chance? A day or two would make no difference; after all, her presence in London could do no good to Molly. Probably Molly would not wish to see her. In any event, her gratitude would not be of so overwhelming a nature as to make up to her mother for what she had lost—probably for ever.

In her desperation she made a clean breast of matters to Marmaduke Prideaux—to a certain extent. He was not a very sympathetic listener—she had not

expected he would be—yet she stayed behind at Aix-les-Bains and he went to London—alone.

As it turned out, he found that he was not the first person who had rushed to Molly's aid. Harry Drummond, journeying to an aunt in Devonshire, bought a paper at Bristol, where the train stopped. A headline caught his eye: "Extraordinary Tragedy in a Taxi-cab. Wife arrested for the Murder of her Husband." He would have passed it over as one of the ordinary newspaper horrors had he not noticed about half-way down the column a name—John Waller. He paused and glanced at it again—the name was certainly John Waller. John Waller? What John Waller? He began to read, with something approaching interest—interest which rapidly became awful fascination.

It was a lurid tale as set forth by the newspaper scribe. A taxi-cab, containing a lady and gentleman, going from Pinner to London, was passing, somewhere about eight o'clock in the evening, along one of the country roads which still exist in that direction, when something attracted the driver's attention and caused him to glance behind him. He stopped the engine on the instant, gave a great shout, jumped off the driver's seat, and rushed to the body of his cab. In that brief glance behind him, he had seen the female passenger in the very act of driving what seemed to him to be a great knife into the breast of the man beside her. So swift, so sure, had been her action, that by the time he reached the door of the cab it was already too late. The man was dead, the woman had fallen back on to

her seat, still with the knife in her hand, apparently in some sort of fit. A tradesman's cart was coming towards them along the road. He hailed it. The man who was in it, a grocer's assistant, got down and came to his aid. Nothing could be done. They came to the conclusion the man was quite dead, while the woman was still unconscious. The driver got back on to his seat; he drove his gruesome burden to the nearest police-station, the man in the grocer's cart keeping beside him.

When he got there, a doctor was hastily summoned to the scene, and pronounced that the man was quite dead, while the woman remained insensible. She continued in that condition for a period extending over several hours. When she did come back to sense again she was in such a state of physical collapse as to be hovering, according to the doctor, between life and death. When the clothes of the two persons were examined, papers were found on the man which seemed to point to the fact that his name was John Waller, while on the woman a telegram was discovered addressed to Mrs. Waller, whose purport the police had declined to reveal, as they regarded it as a very important piece of evidence. The driver declared that he had distinctly heard the man address the woman as his wife.

When Harry Drummond had got to the end of that masterpiece of the descriptive reporters' art—there was a good deal more of it on which we do not touch—he drew a long breath. What on earth did

it mean ? He stared in front of him as if he were seeking for the answer on the other side of the compartment. Every nerve in his body tingled ; the blood was rushing through his veins as if he were attacked by some fever, and he read the report, every word of it, again.

The result of that second reading was worse than the first. Something had happened to his eyes, he could not see out of them ; everything was surging about him as if in a sort of whirling mist. While still in the stupor, which seemed to have settled on his brain, he became conscious that a voice was addressing him ; it needed a great effort to enable him to realise that the voice was that of a passenger on the seat in front of him.

“I see, sir, that you are reading about that terrible occurrence in a taxi-cab ; amazing, in these days of education, progress, enlightenment. What horrible things take place around us almost daily ; it makes one despair of humanity. People, educated people—it would seem even women—yield to a lust for blood as they did in the days of savagery.”

The speaker was a talkative person who had the appearance of being a country squire. In a further corner was a young gentleman who looked as if he had something to do with horses.

“What I wonder is, what did that johnnie do to her which made her stick a knife into him, in a taxi-cab, on a public road, when she knew perfectly well that she was bound to have to pay for

it. It must have been something pretty bad. Women, even the worst of them, don't do that sort of thing unless they're in a pretty tight place."

Drummond said nothing. Was it possible that these men were speaking of the woman who was dearer to him than his own life? Could that story in the paper refer in any way to her? Only in some unthinkable nightmare could such questions possibly be asked.

The train stopped at Exeter. His aunt lived on the other side of Star Cross, where the train did not stop. Her motor-car was to meet him at Exeter Station. He got out, still feeling that all things were surging about him. He asked a porter when was the next train to town. The man informed him, gratuitously, that the train from which he had just descended had come from town. When Drummond informed him sharply that he knew it, the man informed him that there was not a train back to town for more than two hours, and that that was a slow one. He would have to get back to town at once, as fast as he could get there. Should he charter a special? A thought occurred to him. His aunt's motor was probably waiting for him outside the station. It was a new one, and powerful. That would take him, driven as he would drive it, as fast as any special. It was evening; there would be little or no traffic on the country roads; he would be able to go as fast as he pleased. He could go back to town in the car which his aunt had sent to fetch him.

What his aunt would say was beside the question. He would learn that afterwards, now he did not propose to stop to inquire. She had sent for him because she was ailing. She had been a goodish sort of aunt to him ; he was fond of her, but if it came to weighing her in the balance with Molly, she simply did not count ! Molly was in jail ! Good heavens ! Something seemed to happen in his brain as he thought of it. If he did not get to her quickly he would go mad.

The motor-car was at the station door. The driver was a young man, whom he had known all his life, the son of one of his aunt's old servants. He had been a groom and had been taught, at her expense, to be a chauffeur and, in a limited sense, a mechanic. His name was Robert Neale. His face lighted up with a smile as he saw Drummond approaching him.

" Glad to see you, sir ; I hope you are well." When he saw the look on Drummond's face his tone became one of concern. " What's the matter, sir ? Hope there's nothing wrong."

" There's something very much wrong. Neale, you're going to drive me up to town."

" Drive you up to town, sir—me ?" The man's face was a study.

" Or I'll drive you, whichever you prefer. There's no train back till goodness knows when, and then it's a brute. Look here, I'll take the car up to town alone. You go back to my aunt and tell her what I've done."

"I daren't, sir, I really daren't. It would be as much as my place was worth to leave the car. Is it anything you've forgotten in town that makes you want to get back in such a hurry?"

"I've got to get back to town as fast as ever I can—never mind why; and I'm going to get back—on this car." He took a letter out of his pocket and, tearing off the back sheet, wrote something on it in pencil, as Marmaduke Prideaux had done in the hotel sitting-room at Aix-les-Bains, when sending that telegram of inquiry to Arthur Rye. When he had done writing, Drummond beckoned to a taxi-cabman. "Here, take this as quick as you can to Mrs. Willingdon of Somershaye—you know the place?"

"Yes, sir; very well, sir. We all know Mrs. Willingdon, sir."

"Here's a sovereign for you to look lively."

"I'll move, sir; thank you, sir." The man, getting on to his seat, drove off. Drummond, turned to the car which had been awaiting him.

"Now, Neale, take me to London, and push her for all she's worth."

"Excuse me, sir, but it's a very serious thing you are asking me to do. May I ask what message it is you've sent to the old lady?"

"I've told her that news came to me in the train which makes it a matter of life and death that I should get back to London as fast as a man can, and that I've ordered you to take me, and that I'll write her, while we've moving, an explanation of the step which I am

Why Drummond Returned 237

taking, which I think she'll find a sufficient explanation, and post it on the way. Off you go ; you know the shortest way ? ”

“ I know it very well, sir. Suppose the old lady calls me over the coals for this, sir ; you know what she is, and 'pon my word, she'd be justified, you know—borrowing her brand-new car and then asking leave.”

“ Confound you, Neale ; are you going to run her, or am I ? I swear to you that you shan't suffer for what I'm asking you to do to-night. Move, man, move ; I'll sit inside while I'm writing to my aunt, and then I'll come on to the front with you, and then you can talk for all your worth. Only push up—push up ! Show what the car can do. Now ! ”

Neale glanced upwards as if he divested himself of all responsibility and cast it upon Providence, and started the car.

CHAPTER XXI

A LATE VISITOR

MR. ARTHUR RYE lived in a house in Fitz-George Avenue. He was playing an after-dinner game of billiards when word was brought him that Mr. Harry Drummond wished to see him at once on special business. He put down his cue.

“Show Mr. Drummond into my room.” He turned to his opponent, who happened to be his eldest daughter, “Dorothy, this game will have to be adjourned. You may as well go to bed—there will be no more billiards for me to-night. I am in for it—there’s a wild man waiting for me in the study.”

His daughter, who was quite a pretty girl, looked at him with twinkling eyes, as if she wondered what he meant. But he knew ! And there, sure enough, in his study, was a wild man—his wildness written large all over him: on his face, in his eyes, in his person, in the fever which plainly possessed him, rendering him incapable of keeping still; in nothing was it more obvious than in the voice and manner and language with which he addressed Mr. Rye the moment he came into the room.

“Mr. Rye, I want to see Mrs. Waller.”

Mr. Rye glanced at Mr. Drummond, and in that

one glance realised that he had not overstepped the mark when he had told his daughter that he was "in for it." He waived all forms of greeting, as his visitor had done.

"Mrs. Waller is not here, Mr. Drummond."

"Do you think I don't know? Do you think I don't know where she is? Do I not know?"

Mr. Drummond threw out his hands with a gesture which showed what a wild man he was at that moment. The lawyer's calmness was in striking contrast to the other's almost fantastic heat.

"I'm afraid this is going to be bad business, Mr. Drummond."

"Going to be! What do you mean by going to be? It's bad business now, isn't it? I have motored up from Exeter at heaven knows how many miles an hour so that I might see her to-night. And I'm going to see her!"

"I'm afraid you won't be able to."

"Why shan't I?"

"You say you know where she is."

"Hang it, man! Haven't I been to the prison? I asked at the police-station where she was. They told me, so off I tore to the prison. I knocked and I rang, and I rang and I knocked. They kept me waiting—but they came at last. A warder—a jailer—or whatever the man calls himself, who, when I told him what I wanted, laughed in my face. He seemed to think that the idea of my wanting to see her at that time of night was ridiculous. Was it?"

I should like to have bowled him over, and shown him."

"It was lucky for you that you did not try."

"Was it? I'm not so sure. I'd rather be shut up in the same jail than be kept outside at the infernal gate."

"Isn't that rather a quixotic utterance, Mr. Drummond? There are more jails than one—you might have been consigned to another. Allow me to offer you a little whisky and a cigar. And if you'll put down that hat and take off that heavy motor coat, and put yourself in that big arm-chair and try to get yourself a little in hand and take things easy, we might have a little chat together which wouldn't do either of us any harm, for, after a fashion, I'm almost as much in a quandary as you."

"How can that be? She's nothing to you; she's all the world to me. I tell you, man, I'd rather they should have hanged me than that this should have happened to her."

"Let me put down your motor coat; put yourself on that chair."

"I can't sit."

"Oh yes, you can."

"I can't, I tell you I cannot." Mr. Drummond looked as if he were going to start off for a ten mile walk then and there; then, on a sudden, as if he had changed his mind, he dropped into the big arm-chair to which his host had called his attention. "I'll try. When I think——"

"Try not to think until you've tasted this whisky and lighted this cigar. I've always found that as long as a man continues to smoke a cigar there's some sense left in him ; when he's not smoking any longer there's none. Here's the whisky, taste it." Drummond took a long drink out of the glass which the other had offered him. " You don't seem to find much the matter with it, that'll do you good. Now light up ; if you're a judge of tobacco you'll find that this is rather a nice cigar. Draw all right ? That's good. Now, Mr. Drummond, as we've already agreed, I'm afraid this is not only going to be a bad business, but it is one already. You can hardly have been serious in your expectations that they would allow you to see the lady to-night."

"I should like to have wrung the neck of the scoundrel who didn't let me. He wouldn't take a message to the Governor. He wouldn't do anything. He only slammed the gate in my face and told me to be off. I wish I had broken his head for him."

"I am glad you didn't. If we wish to serve, and not injure, this young lady, we shall be very careful to observe all the rules and formalities which apply to such cases and, even in trifles, to see that right is on our side. Mrs. Waller is a prisoner, like other prisoners——"

"Don't talk like that, man, you'll drive me mad!"

Harry Drummond had sprung up from his chair and stood quivering with agitation.

"Sit down, Mr. Drummond, sit down. Before all

else, in these matters, coolness is essential, if you don't wish to injure, perhaps beyond repair, the lady whose interests you have at heart. I was struck by your calm and businesslike bearing on the only other occasion on which I have had the pleasure of meeting you ; that attitude is much more needed now than it was then. Can't you manage it ? "

Wild eyed Mr. Drummond glared at the solicitor, then plumped down on to the seat of the chair again puffing furiously at his cigar.

" Again, that's better. I hope you find that good tobacco. We must remember that the authorities cannot discriminate between persons whom they have in their charge, and that the rule which applies to one must apply to all. Prisoners are only allowed to see visitors between certain hours, and then only under conditions which are not so pleasant as they might be. A prisoner's legal representatives have privileges of access which are denied to others. I think if you will come with me to-morrow morning, I may be able to manage that you can exchange a few words with Mrs. Waller, under conditions as nearly private as is humanly possible.

" At what time to-morrow ? "

" That is rather a difficult question to answer at the moment. I presume you know that her first examination before a magistrate is to take place to-morrow ? "

" I didn't know it. Do you mean to say that she'll be taken to a police-court ? "

"Or course, in accordance with the invariable custom. The examination would have taken place to-day, only she is still in such a state of prostration that the prison medical officer thought that it had better be postponed till to-morrow. There's another point to be considered. If her health does not improve, access to her will not be so easy as under normal circumstances."

"Easy ! You call access to her easy ! When I'm still seeing that infernal door which was slammed in my face. Is she ill ?"

"She's in a curious state of health."

"What the something do you mean by a curious state of health ? Is she ill ?"

"My dear Mr. Drummond, what is the use of shouting at me like that ? You only excite yourself unnecessarily, and make the position more strained than it is already. My one wish is to tell you all I know. I do not know if she is ill or if she isn't, even the prison doctor doesn't. His first impression was that she was—well, to put it plainly, mad. He has changed his mind. I happen to know the man who acts as medical officer, and I had it from his own lips that she seems to be in a curious state of health."

"Do you know the prison doctor ? What is his name and address ? I'll go and see him, perhaps he does know something."

Again Mr. Drummond had started from his chair. Mr. Rye held out a deprecating hand, as he might have done to a too impetuous child.

"My good sir, it's no use my giving you his name and address. If you did go, he wouldn't see you ; if he did see you, he'd tell you nothing. What I am saying to you is, of course, being said in the strictest confidence. If, at each remark I make, you're going to start off at a tangent—why, the only thing I can possibly do is to say no more. Can't you behave like a sensible creature. You're neither a hysterical woman nor a crack-brained schoolboy. This lady is in a very serious position. What we have to do is to keep our heads. If you persist in losing yours, or, if you'll forgive me saying so, in other words, in playing the fool, the wisest thing will be to shut you up under lock and key and keep you shut up until everthing is over."

"I only wanted to—to know if she's ill."

There was penitence both in the speaker's tone and manner, and anguish as apparent in his voice and eyes.

"The prison doctor declines to commit himself. I last heard from him about half-past six this evening. Up to that time Mrs. Waller had continued to go off into a series of what seemed swoons—for considerable periods of time she remained unconscious. The doctor was at a loss to determine what could be causing them. Her general bodily health did not seem to be good ; but, apart from that, he dropped a hint that it almost looked as if she had been drugged—or rather as if she were slowly recovering from the effects of having been drugged."

Drummond was now taking things more calmly than at the commencement of the conversation.

"Who can have drugged her?" he asked. "I know absolutely nothing about anything. I only saw that wretched screed in that Bristol paper; I've no first-hand knowledge of what has happened. Who is supposed to have drugged her?"

"That's the mystery. You see the only witness worth considering seems to be the driver of the taxicab; the police are keeping him to themselves; it is not easy to get at him, even if one wanted to. I suppose they will put him in the box to-morrow, and then we shall know a little better where we are. In the meantime we are groping in the dark. From what I can gather, Waller was mixed up in that explosion which took place in a house on the other side of Pinner, to say nothing of his wife."

"What explosion?"

"I thought you said you had seen the evening papers."

"I saw that rag at Bristol, but all I read in it was—you know what—that was more than enough for me. I saw nothing about any explosion; there might have been something in it about the explosion, but I didn't see it—I shouldn't have read it if I had. What explosion do you mean?"

"So far as I know, no exact and reliable details have yet gone into the papers—they are full of surmises—but it seems that a house a few miles the other side of Pinner—I forget the name of the place—was as

good as blown up, and thirteen or fourteen men, who were either in it, or just outside it, were blown—literally—to pieces."

"Good heavens! How did that happen? Was it gas? What has it to do with her?"

"That's it. It wasn't gas. It looks as if it were Waller, to say nothing of his wife."

"His wife? What in thunder do you mean? How can his wife have blown up a house and fourteen men? And, by the by, when you talk of his wife, I suppose you're talking of Miss Mitford?"

"I am; he may have other wives, but if he has they are of no interest to me. I am only interested in the one I know—and she was Miss Mitford."

"Then what do you mean by suggesting that she could have had anything to do with the sort of thing you are talking about?"

"Well, there's the house blown up, and the men blown to pieces—it seems that that taxi-cab was being driven straight from that house. Persons have come forward who declare that they saw that taxi-cab pass out of the gate, and that almost in the same instant a terrible noise proceeded from the house, and when they ran to see what had happened there were the men in pieces and the house in ruins. Don't you yourself think that the inference is that the persons in that taxi-cab had something to do with the explosion?"

"But it's incredible; absolutely, entirely incredible."

"Just so; but if you had been in business as a

solicitor as long as I have, you'd know that it is generally the incredible which happens. Read the newspapers—not only of this country, but of other countries—they are full of the incredible, which happens to be fact; they wouldn't be the paying properties they are if it weren't for what you call the incredible. Not a day, I believe I should be right in saying not an hour, passes in any country in the world which is not marked by what people who are either ignorant or unobservant, or both, call the incredible. I am continually meeting it in the ordinary course of business, and, as I dare say you are aware, ours is a good, old-fashioned, family practice, which we desire, above all things, to keep in the realms of the commonplace. We want to have nothing to do with the unusual, the sensational; but whether we want—or don't want—we have to deal with it, sometimes seven days in the week. Bombs were thrown at that house on the other side of Pinner — there's not a doubt of it — and although I am not, as a rule, a betting man, I am willing to bet a trifle that they were thrown by someone in that taxi-cab. Waller is dead, his wife still lives, and there's the driver; you will learn if I am right or wrong pretty soon."

Drummond, leaning forward, his arms on his knees, glared into space.

"You haven't told me yet at what time I can see her to-morrow."

"I told you I can't; it depends on her health,

upon how she is ; perhaps she'll be in a state to see no one. Then there's the magisterial examination—if that's to take place, I don't know what time they'll take her to the police-court, and I doubt if we shall be able to see her before they do. We might see her in the police-court."

"In the court itself ? And you talk of being private ! "

"Not in the open court, but in the cells below. I shall have to see her there myself. You understand that we're not appearing for ourselves. We never do appear in criminal cases ; they're not in our line at all."

"Aren't they ? Why aren't they ? Who is appearing for her ?"

"Barnard Abrahams. He's the best criminal man at present in England. As the case will have to go to trial we've briefed him from the first ; it will be an advantage to have him with us all through."

"Why will it have to go to trial ? You don't mean to say that you think—" Mr. Rye held up a warning hand.

"Stop, Mr. Drummond, stop. I'll say, if you prefer it, that while we hope it will not have to go to trial, we feel it our duty to be prepared for eventualities."

"Every word you utter makes the whole thing seem more like a nightmare. I can see that you are taking it for granted—that she did this thing. Do you, or don't you ?"

"That's a point which I would much rather not discuss ; but since you insist, I would remind you that the driver of the cab said that he saw—actually saw—her do it ; and the knife was certainly found in her hand. She was drabbled all over with his blood. Those are awkward facts, Mr. Drummond ; there may be extenuating circumstances—personally I can conceive of many—but it would be worse than folly to pretend that those were not awkward facts, and that we have to look them in the face."

"I don't care ! I do not care ! If an angel came down from heaven and swore that he saw her drive a knife into that scoundrel I'd say he was a liar."

"Mr. Drummond ! You use very strong language ; your calling him a liar would not prove that he was a liar. The law assumes that a man is telling the truth until he's proved to be a liar. It deals with proof, and proof only ; it won't even listen to opinions. Yours will be merely—shall I say—a pious opinion."

"I know Molly Mitford. I know her from beginning to end, through and through, and I will swear that she's no more capable of killing John Waller than I am."

"But, pardon me, Mr. Drummond—and I hope you won't want to kill me for saying so—but after what I've seen of you since you've been in this room, I should say that you were very capable of killing John Waller."

"As I live, you are right ! I wish I had done."

CHAPTER XXII

THE TAXI-CABMAN

IT was still early on the following morning when Harry Drummond presented himself at Mr. Rye's office in Great Marlborough Street. No greetings were exchanged ; the quick-witted solicitor had only to glance at his visitor's face to realise that he was in no mood for formalities of any sort or kind. He came to the point with his first words.

“The examination is to take place this morning.”

“Is she—is she—better ?” Drummond's voice was shaky.

“It would seem that they consider her well enough for that. I take it that the doctor will be present, and that they will make the examination as short as they can. I expect that her cousin, Marmaduke Prideaux, will arrive in town to-day. He is coming as fast as he can from Aix-les-Bains.”

“And her—mother ?” The solicitor was looking at some papers with which he was busy at the table.

It almost seemed that he avoided the other's glance.

“I wired to Lady Lucy ; it was Mr. Prideaux who answered ; it is possible that she is accompanying him. We'd better be starting.”

"Where is the examination to be held?"

"At Harrow."

"I have my aunt's car outside; I had a wire from her this morning giving me permission to keep it in town. Hadn't we better motor over? Who is coming with us?"

"I suppose we should be quicker in a motor. There will be you, me, and the clerk. Abrahams is to meet us at Harrow. Are you ready? We can talk as we go. If we want to see her before she goes into court we shall have to be there early."

"I don't understand why they took her to prison at all. I thought no one was ever sent there till they had been before a magistrate."

"I don't quite understand myself. She was still unconscious when they got her to the local police-station, where there was absolutely no accommodation for that sort of thing. So they got a doctor to attend, and a magistrate too, who held, from what I can gather, in the station house itself, a sort of formal inquiry, and on his warrant she was committed, not exactly to prison, but to the prison infirmary, where she has been ever since, and where, of course, she has received every possible attention. It seems to me that was the best thing they could have done."

"I don't like to think that she's been in prison at all—ever past that infernal door."

When these remarks were being exchanged, Mrs. Willingdon's motor was on the way to Harrow. Mr. Rye glanced at the young man at his side. It was a

moment or two before he answered. When he spoke it was in measured tones, as though he were weighing each word before he uttered it.

"I hope, Mr. Drummond, that you're under no delusion—that you have been making some effort since I saw you last night to understand what the position really is. What, for instance, do you suppose will be the result of the examination which is to take place to-day? Do you suppose she will be discharged?"

"She will be if on the bench there's a man with a grain of sense."

"Don't talk nonsense; pardon my speaking plainly, but if you're going to adopt that attitude I shall hesitate about using my influence to obtain for you a few minutes' conversation with Mrs. Waller. As certainly as you and I are sitting here the inquiry will be adjourned, and Mrs. Waller will return to prison—and quite rightly."

Harry Drummond was silent. He was looking straight in front of him. Then he said, as if the words had been wrung from him :

"Heaven! What a world this is! What she has suffered through no fault of her own—that delicate, helpless, innocent, pure-minded girl, who I do not believe has ever had an evil thought or done an evil thing. And now she is to suffer this—this—infernal wicked shame and agony, and you consider yourself entitled to sit on me because I—I'd—— Oh, it doesn't matter! I've heard of the crimes men do in their silly

ignorance, but this—this surpasses anything." He put his hands up to his face, then down again, and smiled—such a smile. "Molly in jail ! That—that helpless child ! And you take it for granted that she's to stay there for an indefinite period. You talk about it as a matter of course—and you're a white man ! I feel—I feel—as if I were going mad."

"If you take my advice, Mr. Drummond, you'll talk of something else—we both will—about the weather. You want to aid her, to brace her up, to give her courage, to help her to bear ; and how do you suppose you're going to do it if you talk to her in that tone, with that look in your eyes ? Go mad yourself, if you feel you must ; but if you can help it, don't drive her mad. Play the man, Mr. Drummond, play the man ! It's good to be out in a good car on a beautiful morning like this—it's decidedly better than Great Marlborough Street."

They were bowling along the Harrow Road. It was one of those lovely mornings which we sometimes get in late September, in which the world seems all aglow with more than summer splendour. Drummond's reply showed no particular disposition on his part to fall in with his companion's mood.

"I wonder what it feels like, on a morning like this, in that jail of her's."

"Let me tell you, Mr. Drummond, that even a jail may be endurable when a conscience is clear. Let's hope that you are right, and that the driver of the taxi-cab is wrong, and there it is."

"He doubts it ! This man doubts it—and he has met her at least once."

When they reached their destination they were ushered into a little ante-room, where a brief colloquy took place with an official.

"The prisoner has just arrived. The magistrates have not yet taken their seats. Her case will be taken at once when they do. I understand you gentlemen wish to see her. I'll have her brought in here if you like, but, of course, I'll have to be present."

"Can't we see her alone for a few minutes ? "

As he put his question, Harry Drummond looked the official very straight in the face.

That personage shook his head.

"Impossible—quite impossible. I am waiving a point in allowing you to see her at all."

"I presume you are aware that I am her solicitor ? "

"I am, Mr. Rye. Without definite instructions I cannot, this morning, allow even you to see her here alone. Time is short. Shall I have her brought here ? "

Mr. Rye nodded. "You understand she is still not in good health. I'm not sure that you're wise to want to see her at all. But in any case, for her sake, don't agitate her more than you can help."

They brought her in between two wardresses—such a pathetic figure ; so small, so fragile, and so young. White-faced, hollow-eyed, looking as if she were not sure if she were awake or asleep. When she saw the two men she gave a little, frightened cry, and actually

clung to the arms of the two women who had her in charge.

"Molly," said Harry Drummond softly, and in such a shaky voice.

But she shrank back, clinging close to her custodians, as if she were much more afraid of him than she was of them, and his heart sank. He was voiceless. Mr. Rye retained his presence of mind.

"I hope you are feeling better, Mrs. Waller. You are still not looking very strong."

"I—I'm not feeling very strong. I—I'm not feeling strong at all. No, not—not at all."

Though she spoke so faintly, as if she had an impediment in her speech, to Mr. Rye, her eyes were fixed on Drummond, and such fear was in them.

"Is there anything you'd like to say to me before the court opens? Is there anything you'd like to have done?"

"Done? How—done? Is there anything—Can you—"

The hopeless agony which was in her girlish voice!

"Is there any suggestion you'd like to make, any question you'd like us to ask? Any request you'd like made to the magistrates?"

"I don't know what you mean. I don't understand. I—I don't understand anything. I don't know what it all means. Why—why am I like this? Why am I here? Of what am I accused?"

"You must know, Mrs. Waller, of what you are accused."

"No one has told me—no one. I suppose I must be accused of something dreadful, but I don't know what."

Mr. Rye spoke to one of the wardresses.

"Has no one told this lady of what she is accused."

One of the wardresses replied, a pleasant faced woman with light brown hair.

"I can't say, sir. We haven't; it wasn't our business. Mrs. Waller has been unconscious, on and off, the whole time she has been with us. Somebody must have told her, but perhaps she didn't understand."

"Do you mean to tell me seriously, Mrs. Waller," asked the solicitor, "that you don't know of what you are accused? Think before you speak—do you say that seriously?"

"I don't know at all. I don't know what I'm supposed to have done, not in the very least. How could I guess—how could I? When I woke up I didn't know where I was, I didn't know until this morning that I was in prison. Why am I in prison? What am I supposed to have done? What is this place? Why have they brought me here? What are they going to do to me next?"

She said all this with an obviously unforced and natural simplicity which conveyed conviction to her hearers in a manner which they evidently found

startling. They looked at each other, the two wardresses, the official in charge of the room, the two men ; then they looked at her. Something in the way they did this seemed to bewilder and frighten her still more.

“ What have I done ? Oh, tell me what I am supposed to have done. Why—why won’t anyone tell me ? ”

The thing seemed so inconceivable that she should be there, charged with such a crime, without knowing, that even Mr. Rye was tongue-tied. The situation was evidently a novel one to him. Each of those who heard her seemed to be finding it hard to speak, to tell her what she wanted to know. All at once, as if desperation lent her courage, she addressed her prayer to Mr. Drummond.

“ Oh, Harry, tell me what it is I’m supposed to have done.”

Her voice was broken with sobs ; he seemed to have lost his altogether. Before, apparently, he was able to find it again, the door of the room was opened and a policeman entered.

“ The magistrates have taken their seats on the bench. Take the prisoner into court ; they’re waiting.”

As if mechanically, the wardresses, each taking an arm, wheeled her round and led her to the door. As she moved she cried, in such a voice :

“ Oh, Harry, what are they going to do with me ? Why don’t you tell me what they think I’ve done ? ”

Drummond moved forward. Mr. Rye caught him by the shoulder. The official barred the way.

"Don't tell her now. There'll only be a scene ; it would be no good. She'll learn quickly enough when she's in court."

The solicitor uttered the words in a sort of whisper, as if he, all at once, were a little hoarse. Drummond exclaimed—and he seemed hoarser still :

"Is she to learn for the first time in the police-court with what she's charged ? Does that look as if she were a murderer ? "

The strong man broke into sobs. Mr. Rye exclaimed :

"For goodness' sake, Drummond, don't do that ; you will unhinge me altogether. I've got to keep my head."

The court was crowded, there were enough reporters to overfill it. Even the magistrates' bench was crowded—not with Justices of the Peace alone. This fine fat case of murder, occurring in that suburban district, was likely to assume the dimensions—however people might talk of it—of a fashionable local festivity. There were some of the smartest frocks in all that countryside on that bench ; and their wearers were all agog to see that dreadful woman.

When the fragile girl, with the delicate flower-like face, was almost lifted by two wardresses into the dock, and "accommodated with a chair," a buzz of something more than surprise went round the beholders.

"Why, she doesn't look more than sixteen,"

observed one dame to another. "Incredibly young to have been guilty of such a crime."

"The younger we are, the worse we are," observed her neighbour, who spoke as one who knew. "As our years increase, our virtues mellow; no woman is a saint until she's nearly fifty. I know I wasn't."

The girl in the dock seemed to be still in a half hazy condition, as if, looking through a mist at what was about her, she was wondering what it meant. Two gentlemen, entering the court, took their seats on the solicitors' bench, next to a man whose closely-cut black hair was powdered with grey. One of these was Harry Drummond; he sat staring at the magistrates upon their seats of honour. Wrinkles had come upon his face during the last few hours; he seemed to have grown older.

The proceedings began with the clerk's recital of the charge. His voice was neither loud nor clear, suggesting, personally, that he took no interest in the matter at all. The girl in the dock seemed to be unaware that what he said could have anything to do with her; she did not appear to be listening, she even seemed to be unconscious that he was droning on. She clearly did not hear the question which he presently addressed to her. The man whose hair was powdered with grey stood up.

"I appear for Mrs. Waller." Having delivered himself of which curt utterance, he resumed his seat. It went round the court that the prisoner was going to be defended, even in the police court, by the famous

K.C., Barnard Abrahams. The spectators wondered to each other what his fees would be, how much his presence on that occasion would cost the prisoner—she, or someone with whom she was connected, must have “pots of money”—which, of course, made the interest greater.

“Call Thomas Gardiner.” A man in the livery of a taxi-cab driver appeared in the witness-box—of medium height, dark-haired, about forty; cool, self-possessed, with a voice and bearing of a person better educated than the average taxi-cabman, he told his story.

He was with his cab on the stand at St. Pancras Station. A gentleman got into his cab and told him to drive to Pinner. He drove him to Pinner. Then the gentleman gave him certain directions, which he followed, until he came to a house which was rather more than four and a half miles the other side of Pinner. Although he had never been in that part of the world before, he knew the distance, because it registered on his meter. It was a large house, standing in its own grounds; he did not know its name. The gentleman did not tell him what it was called, he just told him the direction to take, and he took it. The gentleman got out and ordered him to wait. He waited just on three-quarters of an hour; there was the time registered on his meter, and he checked it by his watch: He was just thinking of asking how long the gentleman would be when his fare came out accompanied by a lady. The fare got into the cab, and the gentleman told

him to drive to Trafalgar Square—to drive fast. The gate leading into the road was some little distance from the house. Just as the cab was entering the road he heard a tremendous noise, two tremendous noises, one instantly following the other. He was so startled that he stopped the cab, but the gentleman told him to drive on. He would have liked to have stopped to find out what the noise meant, but his fare was plainly in a hurry, and as stopping would increase the amount of his liability, he did as he was ordered and drove on—at a pretty good pace.

At this point the witness hesitated ; his manner conveyed the impression that he was anxious to be very exact in what he said, and also that he was conscious of the fact that every eye in the court was fixed upon him. It seemed that he drove on, and on, and on, nothing happening to attract his attention or to cause him to look round to see what was taking place in the cab. Whether his passengers were talking or not he could not say. Not a sound of any sort reached him from the body of the cab : they might have been asleep for all he knew. Here he hesitated again. He was clearly reaching a point at which he was aware that cautious utterance was of the first importance.

He had driven, according to his meter, nearly eight miles, when something caused him to look behind—he could not say what, at that particular moment, caused him to look behind ; it was, he believed, the first time he had done so. He was not conscious of having heard any sound, but he supposed that something

must have attracted his attention, because he did look round. He saw, through the window, which was at his back, the female prisoner standing up in the body of the cab. She had something in her hand which looked to him like a knife. She was leaning over the gentleman, who looked as if something funny had happened to him, and she struck him with whatever it was she was holding in her hand. So startled was he, said the witness, that for the moment he lost control of the steering-wheel, so that the cab almost went into the ditch.

"No wonder," observed one of the wise men on the Bench; and it was clear that the general opinion in court was that it would not have been surprising if it had gone right in.

The witness explained that he only lost control of the engine for half a second, and that then he stopped the engine, put on the brakes, and jumped on to the road as quickly as he could, rushed to the side of the cab, but between his seeing what the woman did and his reaching the side of the cab several seconds had possibly passed, and by the time he got there the male passenger was huddled up in a corner of the cab, his clothes soaked with blood, while the woman had dropped back into the opposite corner, and, with a great knife which he could see was wet with blood still held in her hand, was apparently unconscious.

That, succinctly, was the story which the witness told. Of course, there was more of it; there was

the postscript dealing with what happened when the grocer's cart came up ; there were diversions in this direction and in that, but the gist of his evidence has been given. Mr. Abrahams was asked if he wished to put any questions. He said that at that stage he did not. He would probably have another opportunity. So the case was adjourned for a week.

An official whispered to Mr. Rye :

" If you wish to speak to the prisoner you'll have to be quick ; they're taking her away at once by a door at the back to avoid the crowd."

" Is there a crowd ? "

" A pretty big one, and I should say, not a particularly friendly one, to say nothing of the photographers who have not been able to snapshot her in court. We'll have none of that sort of thing here. If they try it, out they go, and we take their camera away."

Mr. Rye glanced at Drummond, who seemed to be unconscious that the proceedings were ended.

" I don't think there's anything to be gained by your seeing her, Drummond ; I'll say a word or two on my own account. Is there anything you wish me to say to her for you ? "

The query was addressed to Mr. Abrahams.

" Ask her when it will be convenient for her to see me. This is going to be rather an interesting case, Rye ; I should prefer to see her in person. I'll make the time. Tell her that I should like to see her the day after to-morrow, as early as possible—if convenient

to her, before nine. I'll make it my business to have the prison rules and regulations stretched. There are one or two things which I shall have to say to her before anything can be done."

Mr. Abrahams motored back to town with Harry Drummond and Mr. Rye—three on the back seat.

"There is one remark," observed the barrister, "which I should like to make to you gentlemen, and one only—I am already overdue in court, and as there are one or two papers which I should like to look through before I get there, I hope I shall not be trespassing too much on your courtesy if I ask you to let me do so—and, as I think the Irishman said, that remark partakes of the nature of a question. Is the John Waller who was in that taxi-cab anything to do with the John Waller who, so the story goes, deserted his wife on her wedding day?"

"He was the man himself—the identical person."

It was Mr. Rye who answered. Drummond still seemed to be incapable of speech; he had no consciousness of his surroundings, his thoughts were with the white-faced girl who was being borne away to jail. The distinguished counsel observed, with an air of remoteness which seemed to be peculiar to him:

"Is that so? Indeed, how odd! This is a world of coincidence. I happen to know something about that John Waller, whose name was not John Waller—something rather curious. I shouldn't wonder if, for once in a way, I do something to earn

The Taxi-cabman 265

your money, Rye, or your client's. You might let me have a chat with you in my chambers this evening at seven. That's all. Now perhaps you'll let me glance at those papers."

They suffered him to do what he wished. Not another word was spoken by either of the trio until Mrs. Willingdon's motor car was back again in town.

CHAPTER XXIII

REPRESENTING THE FAMILY

“YOU left the house with your husband—yes; at the front door you found a taxi-cab, waiting—which I presume you got into?”

One of those cold, cheerless, scantily furnished apartments in the jail, in which prisoners awaiting their trial are permitted to have interviews with their properly accredited legal representatives. Mrs. Waller on a chair on one side of the heavy deal table, Mr. Barnard Abrahams on a second chair on the other. He had said to her:

“Mrs. Waller, I don’t want to be the least bit of a nuisance to you. You’re not looking so fit as you ought to do, though, mind you, I’m not sure that pallor doesn’t suit you, but I want to get from you some idea of what actually took place, so that I may be able to get you out of these uncomfortable quarters—in which they never ought to have put you—as soon as I possibly can. So without worrying yourself in the very slightest degree, just try to see if you can’t answer some of the questions I am going to put to you, so that I may have some sort of notion of whereabouts we are.”

He had brought, with his questions, the narrative

of that fateful day to the point at which she had quitted, with her husband beside her, that house on the other side of Pinner. Nothing could be more genial than his manner, no one could have handled the lady with a nicer and keener sense of what the situation exactly required. More than once he had brought her almost to the verge of a smile.

“So you got into the taxi-cab—yes ; then——”

“Mr. Waller threw those bombs.”

One suspected that her answer took the learned counsel a little by surprise. He leaned over the table, twiddling the lead pencil which he held between his fingers.

“Mr. Waller threw them ?” She nodded. “Of that you are sure ?”

“Quite ; because that is all I remember.”

“What I don’t quite understand is how, if Mr. Waller threw them with his own hands, you and the taxi-cab escaped unscathed.”

“As the cab was going through the gate he stood on the seat and threw first one bomb, and then the other, back towards the house.”

“What distance were you from the house ?”

“I don’t know, I couldn’t see ; I think we were some little distance, because I had a feeling that he was throwing them with all his might, as far as ever he could.”

“And then what followed ?”

“I can only say that there was a frightful noise, the most dreadful noise I ever heard in all my life,

and that's all I remember. I think I must have fainted."

"You think? You are not sure?"

"I must have fainted or done something of the kind, because the next thing I remember is finding myself on a bed in a room in what I now know was this prison."

Mr. Abrahams followed every word with close attention.

"Do you mean that from the moment in which he threw those bombs to the moment in which you found yourself in this prison you remember nothing at all?"

"Nothing—nothing at all. When I did come to I thought that I had only been like that for a moment, that the bombs had only just been thrown, because the noise they made was still ringing in my ears—that's why it seemed so strange to find myself in a room. I had a sort of feeling that I still ought to be in the open air, in the taxi-cab. Then I thought that I must have been hurt in some way by the explosion ; my head hurt me so, I seemed to be all over pains, so I thought I was in a hospital ; until yesterday I never knew it was a prison. I still don't understand how I came to be there."

"Then your mind from the moment in which those bombs were thrown till you found yourself in bed is entirely a blank?"

"Quite a blank. It seems from what I hear that I must have been in the cab quite a time ; I thought I'd

only been there a few seconds. I must have been unconscious for a long while."

"You heard what that man said yesterday in the witness-box."

"I did; but I do not think that I could have done what he says I did while I was unconscious."

She said this with a simple directness which made him smile.

"Nor do I. I've heard of people doing strange things while they were sleeping, but I should say that the state you were in is hardly comparable to being asleep."

"So I should say. I cannot help feeling that what he said isn't true: I don't see how it can be true."

"You perceive that, granting your position, we are left with but one alternative—the fellow must be a pretty scoundrel."

"I don't know; I can't say anything about that, but I feel perfectly certain that I never did what he says I did."

"There's the knife. How came the knife to be in your hand?"

"I can't tell." She looked at him with eyes big with wonder.

"Did you have such a knife as he describes in your possession?"

"How do you mean in my possession? I never had a knife of my own in my life, never; not even a small penknife to cut pencils. I often used to wish I had one, but I never did have. I had nothing of any

kind in my possession. When those two men took me away from Leicester, Agatha Norris brought me my hat. I hadn't even a pair of gloves—I had nothing, simply nothing."

"No one gave you a knife at that house? You didn't pick up one?"

"There wasn't, so far as I know, one to pick up. I never saw one. I'm quite sure I never had a knife, so I don't see how there could have been one in my hand."

"It does seem a little difficult, doesn't it? Did anything in Mr. Waller's manner, or about the cabman, give you any cause to think that they might know each other?"

"I can't say—I never even saw the cabman. I opened the door of the cab myself, and, as far as I knew, the man never once looked round, and he never spoke. Mr. Waller didn't speak as if he knew him."

"I see. Then you can't even say if the man who drove you from that house was the man who appeared in the witness-box yesterday."

"Of course I can't. I did see the man in the witness-box, but I never saw the cabman. When we left the house I was half out of my senses with fright—you can't think what a state I was in, so even if the cabman had looked round, and I had seen him, I doubt if I should have known what he looked like."

When he left the jail, on his way to the Law Courts, Mr. Barnard Abrahams scribbled a note which,

not very long afterwards, reached Mr. Rye at his office in Great Marlborough Street. It was a very brief one :

“Dear Rye,—Look up that taxi-cabman’s record, and let me see you again to-night.—B. A.”

Mr. Rye, ringing his bell, instructed the clerk who answered to send up Mr. Pellatt. A slight, weedy, unhealthy looking youth appeared, who had a very large nose, a very large mouth, and curious eyes.

“ You were in the Harrow police court yesterday, Pellatt. What do you think of the man who gave evidence as a taxi-cabman ? ”

“ I don’t know what to make of him, sir. He spoke as if he were telling the truth. I should say that he was telling the truth if I hadn’t had a sort of feeling that I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“ Where could you have seen him ? Do you often ride in taxi-cabs ? ”

“ Very seldom, sir, except at your expense when I’m on business for the firm. Salary don’t run to it. Perhaps I never have seen him. He wasn’t such an unusual looking party—but there the feeling was.”

“ I want you to find out all you can about him during the course of the day, and report to me at five o’clock. Find out everything and anything, only remember we only want facts, no embroidery, Pellatt.”

“ I’ll do my best, sir.” Mr. Pellatt went out. Mr. Rye said to himself when he had gone :

“ I wonder what Abrahams wants his record for,

that he need send me this note. Does he suspect the man's a liar ? He struck me as if he were a man who was telling the truth. I can see he impressed Pellatt, who, believing all men to be liars, has as keen a nose for a lie as anyone I ever heard of. What tale has Mrs. Waller been telling Abrahams ? "

He still had the barrister's terse note in his hand when a clerk brought in a card. Mr. Rye glanced at it.

" Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux. Show him in at once." He observed to himself when the clerk had gone: " So one of her relatives is going to appear on the scene at last, to show an interest in her at least to that extent ; and that is not her mother." A visitor was shown in. " Mr. Prideaux, I am very glad to see you, though the business which has brought you here is such a disagreeable one."

Mr. Prideaux was finding a place for his hat, cane, and gloves.

" So disagreeable, Mr. Rye, as to be altogether beyond my understanding. Until this morning, when I read that taxi-cabman's evidence yesterday in the police court, I should have said that it was out of the question that that unfortunate girl could have had even the remotest connection with such a crime as the one she is accused of ; but in the face of what that fellow seems to have said, I don't know what to think. It's beyond me altogether. So the first thing I want from you, Mr. Rye, is your opinion—your frank, candid opinion. Can she have done this thing ? '

“You know as much about the matter as I do.”

“That’s impossible. I only know what I’ve seen in the papers.”

“That’s all I know ; so far as I’m aware, that’s all anyone knows. Mr. Abrahams, whom I have retained, saw her in jail this morning—at least I believe he did; though his doing so was rather irregular. I have an appointment to meet him to-night, and then, probably, he will tell me what passed between them. But until then I am in the position of one of the public—in your position.”

“You saw her yesterday in court ?”

“Oh, yes. I saw her ; her manner impressed me with a feeling that it is impossible that she can have done it, until the man Gardiner went into the witness-box and I heard his story. We shall have to shake his testimony in some way or other or we’re in a very unfortunate position.”

“That’s just it. That is a reflection which has occurred to me ; but what motive can a man in his position, taken casually off the railway station rank, have to tell a lie—and such a lie ?”

“I may tell you, between ourselves, that that is exactly what we’re trying to find out. If we can’t shake his story, which will not be easy, because I understand that there’s corroboration behind it—”

“Corroboration ? Is there really ? Mr. Rye, you don’t mean that ? But what could have made her do such a thing ?”

“Unfortunately that may turn out one of our

weakest points. I fear that she may have had motive enough."

Mr. Prideaux shook his head and sighed; for a moment it almost seemed that his emotions were too deep for words.

"It's awful! The most awful thing of which I've ever heard; that she, just at the beginning of what ought to have been a long and happy life, should have placed herself in such a position. Poor, poor girl. Sinned against as well as sinning. I am very fond of her, Mr. Rye, very fond indeed! You can have no conception, apart from the bearing which it, of course, has upon our family position, what this means to me."

"There seems to be somebody else who's very fond of her."

Mr. Rye said this with a little twinkle which the visitor apparently misunderstood.

"Her mother?" Mr. Prideaux lowered his voice. "Mr. Rye, you must not judge Lady Lucy Mitford too harshly."

"I was not thinking of Lady Lucy, Mr. Prideaux; but of a gentleman—Mr. Harry Drummond."

"Mr. Harry Drummond! What Harry Drummond is that?"

"That I'm afraid I can scarcely tell you; except —" A clerk entered and whispered in his ear. "Show him up. Mr. Drummond is downstairs, Mr. Prideaux. Perhaps he'll be able to answer your question himself. He has shown very great interest

Representing the Family 275

in Mrs. Waller's affairs, and continues to do so still."

The door opened. "Here is Mr. Drummond. Mr. Drummond, will you permit me to introduce you to Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux ? "

CHAPTER XXIV

NO. 8 ARCADIA AVENUE

MR. DRUMMOND seemed to be too agitated to acknowledge the introduction. He instantly broke into heated speech.

“Mr. Rye, I’ve been to the prison, and they won’t let me see her. What kind of a country is this in which they treat an innocent girl as a felon, refusing her even the comfort of a few words with her friends ?”

The solicitor glanced at Mr. Prideaux. Mr. Prideaux’s bow had been ignored. He hardly seemed to know what to make of this young man. The solicitor asked :

“What would you have said, Mr. Drummond, if they had let you see her ? I do not wish to intrude on your confidence, but—was there anything important you wished to say to her ?”

The gentleman glared at Mr. Rye as if he had been guilty of an impertinence.

“I am hardly prepared to tell you what I proposed to say. What I want to know is whether those people at the prison have any right to keep her friends from seeing her, she being a perfectly innocent person, and locked up for no reason at all in that infernal place of torture ?”

"I am afraid, Mr. Drummond, that for information on the subject of the prison rules I must refer you to the prison authorities. As I think I have already explained to you, our practice does not lie in that direction at all. We know no more about the actual practical working of the criminal law than I expect you do. Mr. Prideaux here, to whom I have had the pleasure of introducing you, represents Mrs. Waller's family. He may wish to see the lady himself. I don't know what is the rule in such cases, but if the authorities allowed a prisoner to see every indiscriminate, unauthorised caller I can quite easily imagine that the results would be—peculiar."

"I don't know on what grounds, Mr. Rye, you call me an indiscriminate caller, as if I were practically a stranger to Mrs. Waller. I would have you know that she and I were engaged, and if it had not been for her unmotherly mother, before this we should have been married. My one great hope is that we shall be married so soon as the infamy of this monstrous charge which has been brought against her has been made clear, which it very soon will be."

Mr. Drummond delivered himself of this remarkable little speech with a surprising show of heat.

"You take Mrs. Waller's innocence for granted, Mr. Drummond."

This was Mr. Prideaux. Harry Drummond's face was a picture.

"Take it for granted ! Sir, what do you do—you,

who, Mr. Rye says, represents her family? Is it conceivable that anyone who knows Molly Mitford can imagine, even for a single instant, that she could be guilty of this thing with which she is charged? I should like to know what you mean by saying that I take her innocence for granted. Don't you?"

"I should very much like to, Mr. Drummond, but there's the evidence of that man Gardiner."

"The evidence of that—" Mr. Drummond left the sentence unfinished. "No amount of evidence that could be brought would convince me that she killed that man Waller. He deserved that she should kill him. In any decent country, where a man gets what he deserves, it would have been held no crime for anyone to have killed such a scoundrel as he was. But Molly is no more capable of killing him, or of killing anyone, than—than—the most impossible thing you ever heard of. Don't talk to me about evidence. Though a hundred men came and swore that black was white, would you believe them?"

"If you had proved that black was black—no. But you would have to prove it—it would not have to be merely a question of opinion. We are as desirous as you can be, Mr. Drummond, to think the best of Mrs. Waller, but what we want is evidence. Do you—be as cool, as candid, and as fair-minded as you can, Mr. Drummond—do you think that the man Gardiner is a liar? That he went into the witness-box with a deliberate intention of telling a series of lies?"

"I'd swear he never saw her kill John Waller—that I will swear."

"Then, in your opinion, he committed deliberate and premeditated perjury?"

"I should like to have an interview with him for half an hour."

"Why?" Mr. Rye'half smiled as he observed the excited young gentleman. "Suppose you did something which prevented his ever saying another word, do you think that that sort of thing would benefit Mrs. Waller's case? If you broke every bone in Gardiner's body, whatever gratification that might afford you, it would make her position much worse than it is already. Can't you understand that what we have to do is not to rhodomontade, but to produce rebutting evidence. We have already instituted inquiries into Gardiner's antecedents. Do endeavour to be reasonably calm until we have learnt what the results of those inquiries are. And now, if that is all you wish to say to me, Mr. Drummond, I am afraid I must ask you to excuse me, as my business with Mr. Prideaux is very pressing."

When Mr. Drummond had gone, Mr. Prideaux said to the solicitor :

"Who is that hot-headed young gentleman? To the best of my knowledge and belief I never heard of him before. Talking of having been engaged to Molly, and of being about to marry her—I didn't understand when—but I gathered that it was to be at a very early date. Is there any foundation for such talk?"

"I fancy there was something between them at one

time, of which Lady Lucy disapproved, and with which she interfered."

"I suppose he has no money, no position, possibly not anything."

"I cannot positively say, but I have no doubt that Lady Lucy felt that Mr. John Waller was a better match for her child."

"He seems to be very sure about the girl's innocence. I'm not sure that it didn't do me good to hear him."

"Of course if you choose to ignore the evidence you can be sure of anybody's innocence. All you have to say is that two and two are five, and stick to it."

"I see, I see. You consider that man's story is more credible than Mr. Drummond does."

"I don't say that ; but I do say that there's only one piece of evidence before us so far, and that until there is more it would be unwise to form an opinion either way."

Mr. Prideaux dropped his voice as he leaned towards the solicitor. Something in the lawyer's tone seemed to have made him uneasy.

"Do you think they would—hang her, if—if they brought her in guilty ?"

Mr. Rye waved his hand, as if in protest ?

"I decline even to consider the possibility of such an eventuality. What we have to do is to take care that they don't bring her in guilty."

Harry Drummond went straight from Mr. Rye's

office to the house on the other side of Pinner, in his aunt's motor, of which he appeared to be making the greatest possible use. He had no difficulty in finding it; the difficulty was in getting close to it when he had reached it. The whole countryside seemed to be gathered in its immediate neighbourhood. There were crowds of people and a small army of police. When at last he had manoeuvred his car up to the entrance to the garden, he found his farther passage barred by a stalwart constable.

"No admission, sir, to anyone. Pass on, please."

"I am Mrs. Waller's friend. I want to see the inspector in charge."

"The inspector can see no one, sir, no matter whose friend. Pass on, sir. Can't allow a motor car to stop in front of the gate."

"But man, don't you understand that I want—"

The constable, ignoring the proffered coin, cut him ruthlessly short.

"Now, driver, take that car away, do you hear?"

The driver did hear. The car moved on as quickly as it could through the crowd of people. They had reached a point where the people were herded less closely together, when a small object, tossed into the car, struck Drummond on the shoulder. Rising from his seat he looked round angrily to see who had thrown it. He was in a mood in which few things would have given him greater satisfaction than to have a row with someone. He could see no one, however, whose bearing gave him cause to suspect that he, or

she, was the guilty party. No one in his immediate neighbourhood seemed to be taking the slightest interest in him or his car. They were too much engrossed in the gruesome business which, having brought them there, caused them to linger.

Drummond looked to see what had hit him. On the bottom of the car there was a piece of paper which seemed to be wrapped round something which was at once both hard and heavy to give it weight. He picked it up. It was apparently a leaf torn out of a cheap pocket-book. Inside was a small, round pebble which had evidently been used as ballast for it in its passage through the air. On the piece of paper some words were scribbled in pencil.

"It might be worth your while to call this morning at 8 Arcadia Avenue, King's Road, Chelsea."

Drummond read it three or four times, staring at it with puzzled eyes. Then he handed it to the chauffeur.

"Pull up for a minute, Neale. Look at that and see if you can make anything of it. Did you see who threw it ?"

"No, sir, I did not. I saw you get up and look round, and that was the first I knew of anything having been thrown."

"Have you looked at what's written on that bit of paper ? What do you make of it ? Can you read it ? It's not too clearly written."

"Well, sir, I can read it, and that's about all. What does it say ? 'It might be worth your while to call this morning at 8 Arcadia Avenue, King's Road, Chel-

sea.' I don't know what it means, sir, unless it means what it says. Where is King's Road, Chelsea? As it says here, it might be worth your while to find out what this means."

"It might; you are right, Neale; we will go. Anything rather than inaction. Having to sit still and do nothing is more than I can stand. I should like to know who did throw this bit of paper, but—anyhow, off you go."

Arcadia Avenue proved to be a street of rather shabby houses, at the Walham Green end of the King's Road. At No. 8 the blinds were drawn, as if the people who lived there had either gone away or were still in bed. When the car drew up in front of it, Drummond and the driver looked it up and down.

"Doesn't look very promising, does it? The windows look as if they hadn't been cleaned for weeks, and the blinds as if they had been down for years."

"It certainly doesn't look as if there was anybody at home, sir. Perhaps there isn't; perhaps someone's playing a joke with you, sir."

"We'll soon see about that." Getting out of the car and mounting the steps to the front door, Mr. Drummond looked for the knocker. "There doesn't seem to be a knocker; I shall have to ring the bell." He rang the bell and waited in vain for some response to it. "No one seems to be coming, but the bell rang. I heard it. I'll have another try." He rang a second time, still without result. "I believe the house is

empty ; someone does seem to have been pulling my leg."

It was a mean, insignificant-looking front door, badly in need of painting. There was a handle on one side. He took hold of it, as if for the purpose of venting his ill-temper by using it to shake the door.

"What a ramshackle affair it is. I believe if I liked I could shake the whole door down. It seems all loose, as if it weren't hanging on proper hinges." All at once he uttered an exclamation of surprise. "My word !—why, Neale, the door's open. I just turned the rickety handle and the door opened."

"I see, sir. You might step inside and see if there's anyone there. Go into the passage and call out, sir."

Drummond acted on Neale's suggestion. He crossed the threshold of the door and called :

"Hallo ! In there ! Is there anyone in ?" He paused ; all was silent. "No one does seem to be in."

"I expect it won't be long before they're back, sir. They wouldn't have left the door open if they'd meant to be long."

Drummond, standing in the passage, turned towards the chauffeur below.

"Neale, I've an odd sort of feeling that there's something queer about this house. There's a—curious smell."

"Is there, sir ? I don't expect some of these houses are too sweet smelling, It doesn't look as if it were too sweet-smelling a street."

"But this is—this is—something very unusual. I don't like it. I've half a mind to explore." Drummond moved farther into the passage. "It's worse in here; I can't make it out at all; I don't like it. I'm going to take a liberty and see what's in this room."

He alluded to a door which was on his right, and which he thrust wide open. The moment he had done so he broke into exclamation :

"Neale, come here, quick! There's something wrong!"

The chauffeur, jumping from his seat, came running up the steps.

"What's the matter, sir? What do you mean, sir, by there's something wrong?"

"There's something hideously wrong. Look, Neale. What's in here?"

Neale, standing by Drummond's side, looked with him through the open doorway into the room beyond. He spoke in a whisper, as if he were awed.

"What's under that sheet, sir?"

Except for a ragged carpet on the floor, an uncovered deal table, and two or three shabby chairs, the room was unfurnished. On the carpet, against the farther wall, were two sheets, stretched to their fullest limit—there was something under them, whose presence was making itself hideously felt. The atmosphere of the room was awful.

"You'd better open the window before you do anything, sir; better breathe in poison than this."

Harry Drummond threw the window wide open
Then he looked round him.

"What's that on the table, sir?" asked Neale, who
was still standing in the doorway.

Harry saw that attached to the table by what
seemed a rusty bodkin, which had been driven through
the centre, was half a sheet of paper. There were
two lines written on it, one at the top, the other at
the bottom. The line at the top was: "They have
been revenged," the one at the bottom, "Give them
Christian burial." Drummond tip-toed to one of the
sheets, removed his cap; raised the edge of the sheet,
then let it quickly fall again.

"Neale! There are dead men under these sheets;
what does it mean? Who was it threw that scrap
of paper suggesting I should call?"

CHAPTER XXV

MR. PELLATT MAKES SOME DISCOVERIES

MR. PRIDEAUX was with Mr. Rye when Mr. Pellatt appeared, just on the stroke of five, to report. The clerk glanced at the stranger. Mr. Rye reassured him.

"This is Mr. Prideaux, Pellatt, a relative of Mrs. Waller. You can say everything before him that has to be said. What have you learnt about Mr. Thomas Gardiner?"

Mr. Pellatt took out a notebook to which, during the course of his remarks, he occasionally referred. He spoke in a rapid monotone, almost as if he were reciting a lesson :

"Thomas Gardiner gave his address in the police court yesterday as 10 Fountain Street, Pimlico. Went to 10 Fountain Street. It's a milk shop, with rooms overhead which have nothing to do with the shop. Thomas Gardiner had two rooms on the first floor. Was not at home. Nobody knew when he would be home. Apparently he seldom is at home. The rooms were taken three weeks ago for a Thomas Gardiner, but so far as I can learn, if he has ever occupied them, no one has ever seen him. The rent of the rooms is thirty shillings a week—

rather a high rent for a taxi-cabman. The man who had the letting of the rooms had no idea that he was a taxi-cabman. At the time the rooms were taken a month's rent was paid in advance, a most unusual thing in that part of London. Tried the doors of the two rooms ; both were locked. Interviewed one of the postmen who was on that round. He told me that, so far as he knew, no letters for Thomas Gardiner had ever come to that address. He called at the house twice a day, and sometimes three times ; he has never had any letters for Thomas Gardiner. Decided to seek for information about Thomas Gardiner elsewhere.

As Mr. Pellatt paused, his employer observed :

“ You do not seem to have learnt much about him at his private address.”

“ Well, sir, what I learnt was of a negative character. If it is his address, it is one at which he is seldom found, at which nothing is known of him, and, what is more, the rooms in 10 Fountain Street are not the kind of rooms in which the ordinary taxi-cabman would be found. The ordinary taxi-cabman doesn't pay thirty shillings a week, and he certainly doesn't pay a month's rent in advance. Those facts are negative facts, but they are not without interest as shedding light upon the sort of person Mr. Thomas Gardiner appears to be, especially coupled with what I learnt afterwards.”

“ What did you learn afterwards, Pellatt ? ”

Mr. Rye was a gentleman with rather a keen sense

of humour. He seemed to find the clerk's manner—his little air of importance, his evident desire to impress his hearers with the fact of what a very keen-witted person he was—amusing. Mr. Pellatt turned over another page of his notebook.

"Went to Scotland Yard to learn how many taxi-cab licences are issued to persons named Gardiner; have a friend at the office who was good enough to supply me with the information. There were a lot of Gardiners, and three Thomas Gardiners. Came to the conclusion that neither of those three Gardiners was the one I was looking for. None of them lived at 10 Fountain Street, Pimlico. Looked the three Thomas Gardiners up at their addresses; one of them lived at Camberwell. He is fifty-five—a big, fat man; has lost one wife and married another; has eleven children living. The present Mrs. Gardiner declared to me that her Thomas Gardiner was not ours. Another lives at Islington. He is little more than a boy—twenty three—and looks younger, and does not in the least resemble the one we know. The third Thomas Gardiner is dead; and this is where the business begins to look mysterious."

Pellatt stopped, looked very hard at his employer, and emphasised his words by tapping the cover of his notebook with the index finger of his right hand.

"The third Thomas Gardiner died a week ago—on his cab-rank in Trafalgar Square. He was on his driving-seat reading a newspaper. A fare came up and hailed him. He just looked round at his fare

and then, before he could speak a word, tumbled off his seat on to the roadway, dead."

"That is rather a tragic story, Pellatt."

"It is, sir, especially in view of the fact that he left a widow and nine children."

Glancing at his notebook, as if to refresh his memory, Pellatt went glibly on:

"With regard to the third Thomas Gardiner, we now come to the most curious part. He was driven home in his taxi-cab by a stranger. When Mrs. Gardiner came to the door to learn what was up, there was her husband dead inside his own cab. I got this part of the story from the widow. When they came to undress the body there was his badge on his coat and his licence in his pocket. It's a rule that when a taxi-cabman dies his licence is to be returned at once to Scotland Yard, and his badge. The taxi-cab which Gardiner drove was his own ; he had bought it with the money left him by his father—and very proud he was of it ; likewise Mrs. Gardiner. Mrs. Gardiner admitted to me that she told all her troubles to the stranger, as that sort of woman generally does, and very sympathetic the stranger was. He offered to buy from her both the taxi-cab and her husband's licence. She was willing enough to sell the cab, but the licence was a different thing—it wasn't hers to sell. When she told the stranger this, he said very well—if she would let him have the cab he would himself take back the licence to the proper people. She let him have the cab, the stranger paying for it

in hard cash—paying more than her husband had bought it for. He went off with both the cab, the driver's badge and licence, having assured her that the two last should be returned at once to Scotland Yard. Neither of them have been restored. No intimation has been received at the Yard of the death of any of the Thomas Gardiners. It looks very much as if the man who went off with the cab, and badge, and licence was the man who called himself Thomas Gardiner in the police-court yesterday."

His two listeners glanced at each other. It seemed that the narrative had reached a point at which they began to find it interesting.

"You seem to have found out a good deal in the time at your disposal, Pellatt; but on what grounds do you connect the person you speak of as 'the stranger' with the Thomas Gardiner whose acquaintance we made yesterday?"

"To begin with, he's got his licence and his cab."

"You don't say so. You are sure of that?"

"Certain, sir. The police have got both the number of his licence and of his cab; they are the Thomas Gardiner's who died, and of whose death no report has reached Scotland Yard. The police took it for granted, and he gave them to understand that he was that Thomas Gardiner. In other words, in the witness-box yesterday he passed himself off as a man who was dead, whom he knew to be dead."

"Is that indeed the fact? Bravo, Pellatt! If it is,

you've learnt something which may turn out to be of vital importance."

"That's not all, sir. I think we've got to the vitally important part of the business already. Mrs. Gardiner, the widow, was present at the police court yesterday. She had found out the number of the taxi-cab in which the crime had been committed, and she had also learned that the driver called himself Thomas Gardiner—that, in short, he had been driving her husband's cab in her husband's name. She learnt this yesterday morning, and directly she heard it she went tearing off to Harrow police-court, to find out what it might mean. They wouldn't let her in at the court, there wasn't room; but she hung about, and after a while a man came out, dressed as a taxi-cabman, whom she recognised as the stranger. She made a dash at him, but the stranger, catching sight of her, drew back into the court house, and probably left by some other exit, because she never saw anything of him again. That he was the stranger, she is prepared to swear, and it is pretty clear that he was very anxious not to give her a chance of finding out whether he was or wasn't. Although the facts which I have learned are still rather of a negative kind, it begins to look as if there were something rather queer about the party who told his story so glibly yesterday."

"If you have got the facts correctly, Pellatt, it does. What do you think, Mr. Prideaux?"

"I think that this gentleman is to be congratulated on the discoveries he has made, and also on the way in

Mr. Pellatt's Discoveries 293

which he has made them. He seems to have shown great perspicacity."

"I am glad, Pellatt, to join myself to Mr. Prideaux. You seem to have done uncommonly well. We must place your discoveries before Mr. Abrahams, with whom I am presently to have an interview. I think he will agree with me that they are of much importance. Is there anything else?"

"Well, sir, that's all I've actually learned, because I've come straight back from Mrs. Gardiner's. I've been nowhere else since. But on the way back, I've been putting this and that together, and I rather fancy that I've hit upon something very singular indeed."

"What is it? Let's have it. You certainly seem to be possessed of the faculty of putting two and two together."

If Mr. Pellatt was gratified by the compliment which his principal paid him, he suffered no signs to escape him. He was much too absorbed in the subject under discussion to allow himself to be gratified by any trifle of the kind. He had a lead pencil in his right hand which he held out towards Mr. Rye, giving it a little shake after nearly every word, so that it seemed to punctuate his sentences.

"Did you get a good view of the witness yesterday, sir?"

"I did. I watched him most attentively."

"Didn't it occur to you, sir, that you had seen him somewhere before?"

Mr. Rye reflected, as if he were trying to make

out what might be the exact bearing of his clerk's question.

“I can't say that it did. He struck me as being a commonplace sort of person who has his double in nearly every crowded London street.”

“It struck me that I'd seen him before, sir. Didn't it occur to you that his hair might be dyed, sir ?”

“His hair dyed—no, why should it ? His hair was quite an ordinary colour. I saw nothing about it to suggest that it was not its natural colour.”

“I admit that it was well done. It was only this afternoon, as I was coming back from Mrs. Gardiner's, that it struck me it might have been dyed. And not only his hair either. I stared at him as hard as I could all the time he was in the witness-box, and all the time I had a sort of feeling, not only that I had seen him before, but that he had seen me, and wasn't over and above pleased to see me again. He looked at me once, and only once, and though he never changed countenance or lost his presence of mind even for a moment—and he was a cool hand, he was, as cool as I ever saw—I had that feeling all along. I'd have been willing to bet a trifle that he was surprised to see me, and not pleasantly surprised either.”

“Where do you think you've seen him before ?”

“That's what I couldn't say, sir, and that's why I never said a word about it to you ; all day yesterday I couldn't say. You know how one does sometimes

have a feeling that one has seen a face before and can't think where, and yet all the while you know that you will be able to place it some time. All yesterday I knew that the recollection of where I had seen that man's face before would come back to me; just now as I was returning to the office from Mrs. Gardiner's it did, all of a sudden—as least, I believe it did; I'm as good as certain that it did. You think, sir—if you've got the man's face before you as clearly as I have—can't you remember where you saw it before?"

Mr. Rye smiled at the clerk's gravity—he was so very much in earnest.

"I'm afraid I can't. Your faculty of observation is perhaps keener than mine. I've already told you that I thought the man was a very commonplace looking sort of person."

"That's his artfulness. He wanted to look like that; not that anyhow he's very much out of the way to look at. At the best of times he's one of those who in a crowd might very easily pass unnoticed by his nearest and dearest."

"Well, Pellatt, let's have it. Don't keep us in suspense. Who did the man remind you of?"

"You remember the party, sir, who used to stand over the road, day after day, with his eye on this office?"

Mr. Rye leaned suddenly back in his chair as if his clerk's words had startled him. He himself was serious enough of a sudden.

"Pellatt ! You don't mean to say that that man—was this man ! If so, then the matter assumes a very grave aspect."

"Mind, sir, I'm not positively certain, because that chap has light hair, and the chap yesterday had dark ; and he had a moustache and light eyebrows, and a nicely-trimmed little bit of beard on his chin, and his complexion was fair, while the party in the police-court hadn't a hair on his face, and his skin was dark. I noticed the skin about his neck, how dark that was. But you can do that sort of thing if you want to ; you can be fair to-day and dark to-morrow, if you like ; there's nothing fresh in knowing how it's done, and though, as I say, I'm not absolutely positive, still I should like to bet a year's salary that the man in the witness-box yesterday who called himself Thomas Gardiner, well knowing that Thomas Gardiner was dead, was the party who used to stand on the other side of the street all day long, day after day, apparently with nothing else to do but keep his eyes on this office. You remember, sir, you sent me over to speak to him. When I spoke to him he looked at me in a way which left a sort of impression on my mind. Yesterday, when he was in the witness-box and looked at me, it was the look he gave me which made me feel that I'd seen him somewhere before. It was the look I recognised ; and just now, as I was coming back from Mrs. Gardiner's"—he struck his open palm against the cover of his notebook—"it came to me all of a sudden that the look he gave me was the

look which the man gave me who used to stand on the other side of the street. I'll swear to it, if you'll excuse me saying so, sir—that is, in a manner of speaking, I'll swear to it. And without being at the present moment willing to go quite so far as to take my stand in the witness-box in a court of law, and swear to it formally and legally, I should be quite ready, as I've already said, to bet a year's salary that I'm right."

"Then, without being disposed to bet with you, Mr. Pellatt, and without knowing what your income is, I will make it my special business that it's worth a year's salary to you if you are."

The speaker was Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux. Mr. Pellatt turned to him and favoured him with what he probably meant to be a bow.

"Thank you very much indeed, sir. That being so, I rather fancy that this will be the very best year I've ever had."

CHAPTER XXVI

SOLICITOR AND COUNSEL

Mr. BARNARD ABRAHAMS' chambers were in Mitre Court. He was engaged in disposing of a hybrid repast, consisting of a mutton chop and a cup of coffee when visitors were announced, and presently Mr. Rye was ushered in, with Mr. Montague Prideaux hard at his heels. Mr. Rye looked at the meal which the eminent counsel was discussing with some surprise.

"It's just after six, but I'm afraid we're interrupting you."

"Not a bit—not a bit. No one ever interrupts me; I don't let them. I have to get my meals when I can. Had a light breakfast this morning at seven, and a couple of captain's biscuits in the middle of the day, so now I'm hungry." He swallowed a mouthful of chop, and washed it down with a drink of coffee. "Excuse the unceremonious fashion in which I receive you, but my clerk takes his meals in a more comfortable fashion than I do. He's a man with a fastidious stomach; he'd never be able to eat a mouthful if he sat down to a dinner-table like this."

The table at which Mr. Abrahams was sitting

was littered with books and papers. He had cleared a small space on one side, on which was the plate with his chop, a coffee-pot, and cup. In front of him, against a pile of books, was propped up a copy of an evening paper. If that really was his dinner-table it was very far from presenting an inviting aspect. The two visitors, both of whom were men who liked good food well served, seemingly could not help some of their feelings appearing on their faces, which the keen-eyed barrister observed.

“I see, Rye, that my notions of housekeeping don’t appeal to you. Don’t be afraid, Rye, if ever I ask you to dine with me, if I ever do have time to dine decently with any man, I’ll give you something better than this. When I get a chance I like the very best as much as you do. Circumstances have hardened me, that’s all, so that I can eat and enjoy such a meal as this. Whom have you brought with you ?”

“This is Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux, of the Foreign Office, of whom you may have heard. He is a relative of Mrs. Waller, and represents her family.”

“Oh, yes, I have heard of him. Glad to meet you, Mr. Prideaux—or I should have been at any other moment. The fact is, Rye, what I have to say to you must be said in entire confidence, between ourselves. I am afraid I must ask Mr. Prideaux to sit in the next room.”

The solicitor looked a trifle blank. Mr. Prideaux spoke.

"If what you have to say concerns my cousin, Mr. Abrahams, I can assure you it will go no farther than this room. I think I am entitled to hear what you have to say about her. But, of course, if you wish to speak to Mr. Rye about other matters, I'll take myself away."

Mr. Abrahams looked at the speaker as he was pouring himself out another cup of coffee.

"Mr. Rye ought not to have brought you, Mr. Prideaux, without letting me know that you were coming. What I have to say to him is for his ears alone ; we are two lawyers ; on this occasion I wish to speak to a lawyer only. Sorry to seem to have to turn you out, but I'm afraid I'll have to. My time is precious, as you can see. I shall be turning Mr. Rye out as soon as I possibly can."

Mr. Prideaux withdrew with what did not seem a very good grace. He probably remembered that he had come all the way from Aix-les-Bains at considerable personal inconvenience, and the lack of ceremony shown him by this unmannerly person was not at all to his taste. The least he had expected was that his presence would be welcome, and that he would be allowed to take an important part in all consultations that took place.

"You've offended him," observed Mr. Rye the moment the door was shut on Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux. Mr. Abrahams stared at him as if he were amazed.

"What do I care ? In the course of my career

I've offended pretty nearly everyone with whom I've come in contact. What does it matter? You have to. You shouldn't have brought him—old fossil; When I said I wanted to speak to you, I meant that I wanted to speak to you only—you ought to have understood that. You shouldn't bring people to my rooms without being asked."

While Mr. Rye regarded him with what were evidently mixed feelings, the barrister leaned back in his chair and lit a cigar which he had taken from his waistcoat pocket.

"I can only give you a very few minutes. I expect someone else presently, so I'll come to the point. Rye, that woman is innocent."

The solicitor stared as though he found the other altogether a little puzzling. "You think so?"

"I don't think, I'm sure. I saw her in gaol this morning, and I know. She's as innocent as you are—or I might put it even stronger and say, as I am. I'd have thought as much of putting a knife into that pretty husband of hers as I would into that mutton chop which I've just devoured—I'd have devoured him. As for that girl, I don't believe that under any circumstances she'd stick a pin into a fly. She's one of those old-fashioned angels, she'd let a man jump on her for exercise and not remonstrate with even so much as a sigh. She never killed the man. I think I should have liked her better if she had done. You got my note. What have you learnt about that taxi-cab driver—Thomas Gardiner?"

Mr. Rye told him of the sleuth-nosed Pellatt's discoveries. The barrister listened with an interest which was clearly unfeigned.

"Smart fellow, that clerk of yours—he's wasted at your office. Your business is too respectable, Rye, to give a man of that sort fair scope for his talents. Well, it's just as I thought. I suspected it when the fellow was in the box yesterday. I was sure of it when I had seen Mrs. Waller this morning—the man's a pretty liar. In a few days that white-faced little girl will be sleeping in her own bed, and without a stain upon her character—the tender soul."

Mr. Rye looked as if he did not quite see how the other came so rapidly to his conclusion.

"You perceive that if Mrs. Waller is innocent, there's only one alternative: that fellow did it himself."

"He did—of course he did—there's not a doubt of it."

"I don't see how you're so positive. Have you anything tangible to go upon?"

When Mr. Abrahams spoke, his words were not a direct answer to the other's questions. He was watching a small cloud of his cigar smoke as if he saw in it something unusual.

"What I wonder is, why the fellow put it on the girl, though perhaps with the grocer's cart coming along the road he could hardly help it—he had to be ready with some sort of explanation. But I shouldn't have thought he was the kind of man to put the knife

in the unconscious girl's hand to lend his tale an air of plausibility ; that wasn't—cricket. Nor do I quite understand why he appeared in the witness-box yesterday, and wasn't satisfied with getting the girl locked up, and so open out for himself a clear field to get away."

"If your surmise is correct, he must be a pretty scoundrel, first of all to commit a foul murder and try to lay his guilt at the door of an innocent girl."

"Think so ? I'm not so sure ; I suspend judgment. Of course, so far as she is concerned, he doesn't mean to carry the matter any farther. He will never appear in the witness-box again."

Mr. Rye looked startled. "What do you mean ? How do you know that ? Is that another surmise, or have you any actual knowledge which I haven't ?"

"It depends upon what you call surmise. I may have my own standards of right and wrong, but I doubt if this is a case of murder in the ordinary sense at all. I should say it was rather a case of an execution. It comes to this : we execute criminals because so many men have made a law that under certain circumstances they shall be executed. The question is, how many men is it necessary that there should be to make such a law ? In small states they make their own laws ; why shouldn't, say, two thousand men make theirs ? Where's the distinction ; where does the difference come in ? Is the action sanctified by mere numbers ?"

"I confess that I don't see what you're driving at?"

"I'm driving at this." Taking his cigar from between his lips, Mr. Abrahams regarded the ash, which seemed very white and firm. "I daresay you carried in your mind, Rye, that I told you that I knew something about the man who called himself John Waller. I do. That's why I wouldn't have Prideaux in the room, because I wanted to tell you. That girl's mother must be—well, she must——"

"Lady Lucy Mitford is not very wise, nor very generous, nor very affectionate; some mothers aren't. We talk, and we hear, a great deal about the beauty of the maternal office, but you'll find Lady Lucy Mitfords in half the houses in the average street. Women are fools; I don't say it in the least rudely, nor cynically either, but they are."

"But she must have been a little out of the common run—a woman in her position; because I suppose she is a woman of some position——"

"Oh, rather; excellent family; related to half the peerage. She would look upon you and me as mere nonentities."

"Then she must have been something out of the common run of fools to have married her daughter to Isaac Cohen."

Mr. Rye looked at Abrahams as if he were not quite sure that he had heard aright.

"What do you mean by marrying her daughter to Isaac Cohen? Who is Isaac Cohen?"

"The man you knew as John Waller ; he was a sort of cousin of mine."

"Abrahams, is it possible ? You don't mean it ?".

"Fact. I sometimes thought that if he'd taken up my game what a counsel he would have made. He'd have been top of the tree in no time. He might have been Lord Chancellor, or Lord Chief Justice, whichever he liked ; while if I had taken up his game, I couldn't have had a better time than he did, but I would have done my level best to have had as good. You know, Rye, there's nothing on earth so good as fighting—real fighting, I mean. I never have cut a man's throat in a real fight to a finish, and I have often wondered what it would feel like, or what it would feel like if he were cutting mine."

He noticed the startled look which was on his hearer's face. "I'm giving you an insight into my character, you're feeling as if you could never trust me with a brief again ; oh, but you will, oh yes, you will. It's because I'm so fond of fighting that I put my back into all my cases, and never lose one if there is a fighting chance to win it. But about Isaac Cohen. Well, he was a most unmitigated blackguard, that is, from the point of view of latter-day civilisation. In the seventeenth century he'd have been a Sir Francis Drake, a Pizarro—one of those ruffians whose names have come down to us surrounded with a halo of glory. I'm very far from being acquainted with the whole of his eventful history, but if I were to tell you as much of it as I do know I shouldn't

wonder if your hair stood up on end. When England, and indeed Europe, became too hot to hold him, as it very quickly did, he went to the happy hunting ground of the man who likes nothing better than carrying his life in his hand: in those days for men of his kidney, it was a good deal better than it is now. I had such a fellow feeling for the man, to my shame be it said—this, Rye, is in the strictest confidence—that after he had been there a while I advanced him five thousand pounds to enable him to become president of a certain State. He had a pretty scheme which needed hard cash to enable him to bring it to a head. So on his bare word I let him have pretty nearly all I had. Trustful, wasn't it?"

"It sounds so, very. I don't think that I should have cared to enter into a speculation of that kind; even for the pleasure of enabling a cousin to become president of one of the South American States."

"In less than two years, for my five thousand pounds, he returned me twenty—pretty fair interest."

"Excellent, but one is inclined to wonder how he managed to pay it."

"I asked no question, I wasn't so ill-mannered. He was the honoured president of an independent State; I was at liberty to presume that it had been presented to him by the affectionate citizens in the usual way."

"Just so, a very reasonable presumption to make."

"I heard no more about him until he walked into

this room about two o'clock one morning—walked in in a hurry."

"How long ago is that ?"

"I suppose rather more than two years. He had changed, greatly changed. For one thing he had become a rich man ; before he left this room he gave me over five hundred thousand pounds to invest for him."

"You're not joking ?" Mr. Rye looked as if he thought the other was.

"I'm making you a bald statement of plain facts. He had had trouble in that State of his and had been glad to get away with his life."

"And the national funds ?"

"Well, he certainly did seem to have saved a good bit out of his income. He didn't tell me the whole story. I wouldn't listen to it ; I felt for a good many reasons that I'd rather not. But from what he told me, and what I heard afterwards, I managed, to a certain extent, to put two and two together. There had been a regular kick-up in that State of his; some people called it a revolution. He had hired the usual lot of bloodthirsty ruffians, who in those days, in those parts, did duty as an army, and, according to his story, they tried to play him false. Anyhow, he and his army had fallen out. They started the game which is so common among thieves, of trying to bilk each other. He won. They had to go without their promised pay. That put up the back of his gallant soldiers. At a general meeting they voted his execution—wherever and whenever

found. Sentence was pronounced some time ago ; it was put into force the other day in that taxi-cab on the other side of Pinner, by the driver of the taxi-cab."

" You seem to have access to some peculiar sources of information. Do you know if that's a positive fact ? "

" I told you what took place and—that's enough. Do you see why I said I doubted if it could be called a case of ordinary murder ? He'd just had a shot at them. I don't know how many he disposed of by those two bombs of his ; nobody does seem to know. In return, one of them disposed of him—the account was closed."

Mr. Abrahams threw the butt of his cigar into the fender, and getting up from his chair he raised his arms above his shoulders as if to stretch himself.

" I asked you here, Rye, to tell you that. And now, if you don't mind, I'm afraid I must ask you to excuse me ; I've another appointment in a minute or two. You'll find that the whole case against Mrs. Waller will collapse. Of course, if it does come on for a second hearing I shall be present at the police-court in the ordinary way, but I doubt if it will. Anyhow, that second hearing will be the last. Mrs. Waller will be discharged without a stain on her character, almost a martyr and quite a saint, and the youngest, prettiest, and pretty well the richest widow, I daresay, in the whole wide world."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MAN WITH THE RED HAIR

TAKING Mr. Prideaux with him, Mr. Rye left the chambers of Mr. Barnard Abrahams with the air of a man who is a trifle startled and still more bewildered. When he got out into such fresh air as is to be found in Mitre Court, he took off his hat and wiped his brow. As he moved towards Fleet Street he thought to himself :

“ What an extraordinary man ! And for a counsel learned in the law, of his standing, what opinions he seems to hold. I have known Barnard Abrahams professionally for I can’t say how many years—certainly for a good many—but I hadn’t the faintest shadow of a notion that he was in the least the kind of person he makes himself out to be. What a curious thing life is. We are continually meeting strangers in the persons we thought we knew quite well.”

Mr. Rye’s feelings on the subject of Barnard Abrahams being an extraordinary man would hardly have grown less strong had he been with him during the interview which the barrister had with a person who came on the scene almost as soon as he himself had left it. Scarcely had the solicitor departed than there came an odd knock at the barrister’s outer door.

"There he is. It looks as if he had waited on the staircase for Rye to go. I wonder if Rye saw him. If he did, I shouldn't wonder if he had a bit of a shock—that is, if he recognised who the gentleman was."

Before answering the knock—he seemed to be alone in the chambers, and to have to do everything for himself—he opened a drawer of the table at which he had been seated, and took out a revolver which he slipped into his jacket pocket.

"Always be prepared for emergencies, one never can tell. Let's see if everything is all right; I'm going to act on my own responsibility, and I want everything to go on rollers—to write finis to this chapter for ever and aye."

He took up a packet of papers, glanced at them quickly, and replaced them in the drawer. Then he went and opened the door. A man came in. His hair, eyelashes, eyebrows, his face, these things were so very red that he might have been described as a red man, and his skin was so covered with freckles that you could scarcely have put the point of a pin between them. Mr. Abrahams eyed him as if he were amazed, and then, after momentary inspection, as if he were amused. He laughed.

"You've done it very well. Is this the very latest? What does it mean?"

"I'm a Scotchman of the name of Macpherson," remarked the new-comer with a pronounced Scotch accent. "Alexander Macpherson, of the township of Stonehaven, where I've a whisky distillery."

The Man with the Red Hair 311

Mr. Macpherson uttered the final words with a twinkle in his peculiar eyes.

"I don't doubt the latter ; there's a whisky distillery wherever you are, or there ought to be. You know, Alexander Macpherson, you've done it very well. Your own brother might not know you, until he saw your eyes. You ought to have disguised them, made them red like the rest of you ; anyone who's seen your eyes once would recognise them when he saw them again. Do you know a gentleman named Pellatt ?"

"There's a young whipper-snapper of a clerk of that name at a solicitor's in Great Marlborough Street. I've heard of him."

"You have also seen him, and he's seen you. He recognised you in the courthouse yesterday. It was the eyes that did it. It seems that you looked at him on one occasion. It was borne in on him that there couldn't be two such pairs of eyes in the world—so he's after you. He's been finding out one or two little things, and he's got you on a little piece of string."

"Has he ? He's an observant, cockney gutter-snipe. I mind the lad."

"The mischief is that he minds you. What have you arranged ?"

"I'm leaving this misbegotten country to-night. We all are."

"That's quick work. Now, what does all of us mean ?"

"All of us that are left. There are four hundred

and seventy-three. He disposed of the others at the house over yonder."

"Yes, quite so ; I don't want to know about that." From a cupboard in a sideboard Mr. Abrahams took some decanters, a siphon and some glasses. Will you have some whisky ? Help yourself. Do you mean to say that four hundred and seventy-three of you are going to leave England in one night ?"

"I do, from different points. We've finished our business. The air of this country agrees with none of us. We are relying on your undertaking, which I am here to see you carry out."

"It was a big job to do in the time, but I think I've managed it."

"That's good hearing. There have been some very anxious hearts among them."

"I can quite believe that—yes, there would be. Pretty souls—that you should talk of anxious hearts." Hitherto Mr. Abrahams had been standing ; now he placed himself on the chair on which he had been seated during his interview with Mr. Rye. He held up what seemed to be a monitory finger.

"You understand this is going to be a quittance—a complete quittance."

"A complete quittance—that is what it is going to be."

"The widow is not to be molested—not, mind you, in any of the thousand and one ways of which you are masters."

"We have no quarrel with her ; we never did have.

She'll never hear of us again. We're going to write at the foot of the account, 'Paid in full.' You may consider it to be signed by all our names. I don't mind going so far as to tell you that we sympathise with her; we always have done. We wouldn't have caused her pain if we could have helped it. There isn't a man among us who would hurt a hair of her head, now or ever."

"Good. You are authorised to speak for the lot? What you say goes?"

"It does. What I say, I say for all of them. You know us, you know our ways, you know it does. Come to business."

Mr. Abrahams opened the drawer in the table a second time, and took from it again that packet of papers. He handed it to the stranger.

"Look through those, you'll find they're in order."

The stranger slipped the packet carelessly into an inside pocket of his jacket.

"I'll just take your word that they're in order; if they're not, you'll hear of it."

"Those papers, Mr. Macpherson, represent half a million of money. You might at least assure yourself of that fact. As they say at the booking offices, 'No mistakes can be rectified afterwards.'"

"We'll see about that if there is a mistake; there's not likely to be; you're not one to make a mistake. If you have, I've no fear but that you'll set it right, you'll see to it." There was a grim significance in the speaker's tone which was not lost

on Mr. Abrahams. "I'm thinking that I'll be going. I'm thinking too that this time it will be good-bye for ever. I don't know how many years it is since last we met ; it's a good few. I'm not likely to live to see as many more, not being the sort that lives to be old." All at once Mr. Macpherson dropped the Scotch accent and spoke in the tones of a well-bred Englishman. "Good-bye, and thank you for the service which you have done us. We haven't got so much as once we thought we should have, but we have got something, and we were beginning to think that we should get nothing ; a thousand apiece is something ; with ordinary luck some of us may manage to make it more—at any rate. I'll try.—Ta-ta,"

It seemed for a moment as if the stranger were going to offer his hand, but that something he saw in the other's face caused him to change his mind. He turned to the door.

"Good-bye. I need hardly say good luck. When you give yourself the trouble to look through those papers you will find that they contain full instructions which, if followed, will enable you to touch the money. I hope you will all of you live long enough to enjoy it." Mr. Abrahams was moving towards the door, as if to usher his visitor out, when there came a sudden knocking—loud, peremptory, masterful. "Hallo ! Who's that ?" The barrister turned to Mr. Macpherson, a curious meaning in his glance. He dropped his voice, as if afraid of being overheard.

"Suppose it's someone—awkward. It might be—you never can tell."

Mr. Macpherson smiled, as if tickled by the hesitancy which all at once marked the other's speech.

"You open the door. You'll not improve matters by keeping your visitor on the other side of it."

"But—suppose it is." The expression in Mr. Abrahams' eyes became still more significant. The knocking came again—if anything louder than before.

"You'll not improve matters, I tell you, by keeping that gentleman waiting. If I'm in an awkward place, I am."

"May be. But doesn't it occur to you that I shall be in one still more awkward. How am I going to explain your presence here? Then you've got all that money on you."

"I'd forgotten the money. It would be awkward if they found that—particularly for the four hundred and seventy-three. Wouldn't it be better in your drawer till—we've seen who the visitor is?"

"Give it to me." The packet of papers changed hands again, and was replaced in the drawer. "Now if it is—" Mr. Abrahams paused. "What are you going to do? I don't want to have a scene here."

"I'll wait and see who it is before I tell you what I'm going to do. It won't be the first tight place I've been in. I'll spare you all I can." The knocking was repeated. "You'd better open."

Mr. Abrahams did open. A young gentleman came striding in,

"I was beginning to be afraid, Mr. Abrahams, that you weren't in. Is Mr. Rye here? They told me in Great Marlborough Street that he had come to see you, so I called in at your office."

"Mr. Rye is not here. He left some little time ago. To whom have I the pleasure of speaking?"

"My name is Drummond—Harry Drummond. Mr. Rye introduced me to you yesterday. I motored you back from Harrow."

"I remember. Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Drummond?"

"I should very much like to speak to you if you can spare a minute or two—if I'm not in your way."

The red-haired man moved forward, smiling as he exchanged glances with his host.

"I won't keep you, Mr. Abrahams. I'll take myself off, and leave the field clear for Mr. Drummond. By the way, how about those papers?"

"Just so. How about them? You had better take them with you. Perhaps that would be the better plan." Once more Mr. Abrahams took the bundle of papers out of the drawer and handed them to Mr. Macpherson. "I think, as I told you, that you will find them in order."

"I have no doubt that I shall. Good-bye. Good-evening, Mr. Drummond, I leave him to you."

Mr. Macpherson went. He shut the door behind him. Harry turned to the barrister, a puzzled look upon his face.

"Where have I seen that man before? I'm sure I've seen him somewhere."

"Have you seen him before?" Mr. Abrahams seemed quite at his ease. He was rattling some coins in his trouser pockets. "Now, Mr. Drummond, what can I do for you? It's rather late, you know, and I've had a long day's work."

"I've had a ghastly day myself. I went over to that house on the other side of Pinner, and someone threw a piece of paper into my motor-car—I don't know who. On it some words were scribbled about going to a house in King's Road, Chelsea. I went, wondering what it might mean. In the house I found thirteen dead men. So far as can be made out, they had been killed in the explosion caused by the bomb Waller threw. I have been"—he put up his hand to brush his hair back from his brows—"I've been mixed up in the ghastly business the whole horrible day. I've only just been able to get off to see Mr. Rye. Now he's gone."

"You don't mean to say that you found in a house at Chelsea thirteen corpses of men who had been the victims of that scoundrel's murderous outrage?"

"I do. Don't ask me about it—you'll see it in the papers, or the police will tell you. I've had more than enough."

The young man had dropped into the chair which had been lately occupied by Mr. Rye, and was seated on it in what seemed to be a state of partial collapse.

The barrister was perched on the corner of the table and was looking down at him.

“It must have been a singularly unpleasant experience, Mr. Drummond.”

“I want to try and forget it—if I can. Mr. Abrahams, I’m told you’re a very clever lawyer, that you’re the greatest lawyer living. Can’t you tell me what to do about Mrs. Waller? Can’t you give me any comfort?”

“Are you interested in Mrs. Waller?”

“Interested? There’s nothing I would not do for her which a man can do. I suppose you’d call that being interested.”

“I do. It’s that way, is it?” Mr. Abrahams got off the table and walked slowly across the room to his visitor. “Well, I can tell you, Mr. Drummond, if it’s any satisfaction to you, that the lady’s innocent.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that; nothing would ever make me believe that she wasn’t. But in this infernal country a woman’s innocence doesn’t seem to count. I suppose they treat all innocent women as they’re treating her.” Harry Drummond rounded his sentence off with some strong language. The barrister turned to him, his hands still in his trouser pockets.

“There are certain forms to be observed, Mr. Drummond, in all countries where criminal cases are concerned.”

“Fancy calling hers a criminal case.”

The Man with the Red Hair 319

"I had an interview with Mrs. Waller this morning, and I could not have been more favourably impressed ; but if a charge of murder doesn't constitute a criminal case, I don't know what it does. In the initial stage innocence or guilt hasn't much to do with it."

"So it seems. You say you saw her this morning. How was she ?"

"Tolerably well ; very lovely, very young, a pathetic figure, Mr. Drummond, and, I should say, absolutely honest. As I have already told you, I could not have been more favourably impressed."

"How much longer is she to stop in that infernal place ?"

"I should say only a very short time."

"You mean it ?" Mr. Drummond started from his chair. "What do you call a very short time ?"

"I couldn't give you an exact definition, but when the case is taken again, I shouldn't wonder if it were dismissed."

"But it's adjourned for a week."

Exactly, for a week. That will probably be the end of it, as far as she's concerned."

"And do you mean to say that she's to be in this awful place for another week without my seeing her ?"

The young man's earnestness seemed to entertain the barrister. He was regarding his visitor as if he were a curious species.

"What the prison arrangements are as regards visitors I am afraid I cannot tell you, Mr. Drummond.

I imagine that if Mrs. Waller wishes to see you, it might be arranged, but, if you take my advice, you won't attempt to see her. You won't be allowed to see her alone; you'll only be allowed to see her under the most unpleasant conditions. For instance, you won't be allowed to come nearer than to shake hands, and there will be officers of the prison present. An interview under such circumstances would not be a pleasant memory for either of you. If you are a wise man, Mr. Drummond, for her sake, as well as for your own, you'll wait. A week isn't such a very long time, and I think I may say that after a week she'll be free."

"How do you know she'll be free? Mr. Rye told me a very different story this morning."

"Yes, possibly, but things have happened since this morning."

"What has happened? Has anything turned up? Please tell me, Mr. Abrahams. I've a right to know."

"Mr. Rye will perhaps be able to tell you better than I can. I refer you to him."

"But I shan't be able to see him till the morning. I shan't sleep a wink trying to guess what it can be. What is it, Mr. Abrahams? Tell me, please."

The barrister seemed to be reflecting. He was observing the young man's almost frenzied eagerness as if it were something both curious and funny. When he spoke, his face was lighted by a smile.

"I envy you, Mr. Drummond, very much indeed."

"You envy me!" ejaculated the young man.
"Good heavens! why? There is no man less to be

envied in the whole wide world." The barrister shook his head, still smiling.

"I don't admit it. You're wrong, Mr. Drummond, quite wrong. A man who can feel what you feel about such a common accident as a young woman, any young woman, is a lucky young man. So many of us are incapable of feeling it—about anything. And since, when a man can't feel he's dead, it seems that a good many of us must be in a bad way. Since you're here, I'll give you an idea what the situation is as I understand it. Mr. Rye has been making inquiries, upon my suggestion, about Mr. Thomas Gardiner—you remember, the taxi-cab driver? And the result of his inquiries goes to show, as far as I understand the matter, that there's not a word of truth in his story. It's a pretty little fable from first to last, lies from beginning to end."

"I knew it. I could have sworn it. Do you suppose I ever thought it wasn't?"

"I don't know what you thought, Mr. Drummond, and I'm afraid it's not of very great consequence anyhow. I won't detain you any longer. I've got a lot of work to do; my work never is done, and you'll be able to go home and sleep—the sleep of the young and just, consoled by the knowledge that the lady of your affections is presently to be proved pure as the unstained snow—and that somebody else isn't. That's about what it amounts to. One's innocence generally means somebody else's guilt—a comforting reflection. Good-night, Mr. Drummond."

"If it's actually known that that fellow's a liar won't they let her go free in less than a week?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Drummond. You go in to Mr. Rye the first thing in the morning; he'll be able to give you a lot of information. I'm only a sort of super, I just carry a banner; the principal performers are in Great Marlborough Street, and thereabouts. Apply to them for all you want to know. You must excuse me, Mr. Drummond; you really must go."

As the young man was going, a thought seemed suddenly to occur to him. He paused, and turned to Mr. Abrahams.

"Do you know it's very odd, but that fellow in the witness-box yesterday, he looked at me, just once, and I looked at him. He had the most extraordinary eyes I ever saw. That gentleman who was in here when I came, I wondered where I had seen him before, and it's just come back to me. Do you know he has exactly the same eyes as that fellow had?"

"Has he indeed? It isn't such a very unusual thing, is it, for the same sort of eyes to be in different persons' heads?"

"I'm not so sure of that—not such eyes as those. I shouldn't have thought there would have been two pairs like them. Of course, in looks and that sort of thing, he was altogether different, but your friend had that man's eyes. I never saw such a resemblance."

"Let's hope not, if they're such disagreeable ones as you suggest. A man's eyes very often give him

away, don't they? In my professional capacity I've noticed it often, and I daresay you have too. Good-night, Mr. Drummond. Take my advice, go right home, get straight to bed, go to sleep and dream sweet dreams. Give Mr. Rye a call in the morning, and I shouldn't wonder if you'll find that he has really good news for you on the lines I've already hinted at. Good-night."

When Mr. Drummond had gone, Mr. Abrahams locked the door and bolted it. He took out the revolver which he had slipped into his jacket pocket when about to open to his red-haired visitor. He looked at it as if lost in contemplation—as if it caused his thoughts to travel in many directions.

"I never used it after all—never had occasion to—not the least occasion. How very funny." He crossed to the table and opened the drawer. "I wonder what would have happened if, when that knocking came at the door, it had been—someone awkward. Would he have made a scene? I ought to be thankful that it wasn't. My distinguished career might have been—punctuated." Putting the revolver back into the drawer, he shut it and turned the key in the lock. "That young man almost recognised him. If he had quite—what then? Bearing in mind the warmth of his feelings for the lady, there might have been happenings. He knew the eyes. What a very awkward possession a pair of eyes like that must be, especially for a man like him. Men who follow his profession ought to look like everybody else, only if

they looked like everybody else they wouldn't follow his profession."

He took a cigar out of a box and lit it; mixed himself a soda and whisky, and before he drank it he said to himself as he looked at the brimming tumbler :

"How near farce is to tragedy."

CHAPTER XXVIII

HARRY'S AUNT

HARRY DRUMMOND had to wait that week, and so had Mrs. Waller. Mr. Drummond would have battered down the prison walls if he could, but they would not even let him pass the doorway to see the lady. When he paid that establishment a call he made such a scene at the entrance, and used such language to the warder in charge, that he was requested in distinctly peremptory tones to take himself away, and it was made clear to him that under no circumstances could a person with his curious ideas of propriety be suffered to cross the threshold of the jail. When he was again on the other side of the gate he would have continued to express his ideas on the conduct of the authorities in a still more emphatic fashion, had not a constable, strolling up, advised him in paternal fashion not to be a fool.

"It's easy enough to get in there," he told Mr. Drummond, "but it's not so easy to get out, as, if you don't take care, you'll find. You're a gentleman, not like one of them who are in and out here half their time. You have got a home to go to: if you take my advice, you'll go there."

Pressure of various kinds was brought to bear

upon the authorities to induce them to set the lady free without any further delay, but they were proof against persuasion. The inquiring Mr. Pellatt made one or two other discoveries about the quondam Thomas Gardiner, and, armed with these, Mr. Rye as well as others, waited first of all on the inspector in charge of the case, and then upon his superior at Scotland Yard, but without avail.

The police agreed that the case against Mrs. Waller was not such a strong one as it had at first seemed. They even admitted that there was something suspicious about Mr. Thomas Gardiner. As a matter of fact, they could not find him. He was not to be heard of at the address he had given—he never had been there. He was not to be heard of anywhere. There seemed at first to be an impression in the minds of the officials that he had been tampered with, “got at” by the prisoner’s friends, who were known to have both interest and money. It was because of that impression that they showed such an unsympathetic front. When, however, certain facts came to be looked into, that impression faded. What Mr. Pellatt alleged against him was easily proved. It was shown that he was not one of the Thomas Gardiners to whom a driver’s licence had been issued ; that that Thomas Gardiner was dead. His widow made it clear that the person who had brought the taxi-cab and had taken away with him her husband’s badge and licence, promising to return them to the proper quarter, had behaved in a manner which, to

use the very mildest language, was peculiar. Then two pieces of evidence cropped up which put his conduct in a more peculiar light still.

A man named Robert Dench, who had been hoeing turnips in a field by the roadside that eventful afternoon, had seen a taxi-cab come along, which stopped within a couple of hundred yards of where he was. He had not noticed who was in it, but he did see that the driver behaved in rather a singular way when the vehicle stopped. He saw him come off the box, stand on the step of the vehicle, and, as it seemed to him, strike someone inside a violent blow. He heard a cry which might have been one of pain, and struck by the singularity of the driver's conduct, followed by that cry, he hastened to a gate, intending to go out on to the road and see what was taking place. Whether the driver heard him moving or not he could not say, but he looked round, jumped on to the box, and drove rapidly away. Dench's story was at least inconsistent with the driver's statements that he had kept the car going and never once looked round until he had seen the woman stabbing the man.

Another side-light came from the driver of the grocer's cart which had come upon the scene at such an interesting moment. He had come down a side lane which led into the main road, and from his elevated seat, looking over the hedges, he could see the taxi-cab some time before he reached it. He was not a very intelligent specimen, but when closely

questioned it was drawn from him by degrees that when he first saw the taxi-cab the door was open and the driver was half in it. He seemed to be doing something to one of his passengers. He could not, at first, see very clearly which one it was, but when he drew closer he came to the conclusion that it must have been the man. And then he saw that the driver seemed to have something in his hand. He leaned over towards his other passenger, the lady, crouching down in the car. The grocer could not see what he was doing, but it took him some time, and when he stood up again the something which had been in his hand was gone.

If the grocer's man was telling the truth, which no one doubted, his statement, joined to that of Robert Dench, shed quite a different light on the driver's story. It looked very much as if the grocer had seen him draw the weapon from the dead man's body and then place it in the unconscious woman's hand.

When the case came up for a second hearing before the magistrates, counsel acting for the Crown stood up and said that the principal witness, on the faith of whose statements the proceedings had been commenced, had absconded. He had given a false name and address, was not a licensed driver at all, and his whole evidence, from beginning to end, appeared to have been a tissue of perjuries. Realising that discovery was imminent, not venturing again to enter the witness-box, he had taken himself off.

Inquiries were being instituted by the police as to his whereabouts, of which he had best say nothing. As he had no evidence to offer against Mrs. Waller, of whose perfect innocence there could not be the slightest shadow of a doubt, he could only express on the part of the Crown the most profound regret for the pain and distress which this man's monstrous falsehoods had occasioned her. When counsel for the Crown sat down, Mr. Barnard Abrahams stood up.

He said that his client had, for some time, not been in very good health, and that on the afternoon of the day of which they had heard so much, she was overcome by serious fainting fit, and was unconscious for so long a time that she actually did not know what did happen. The presumption was that her husband, trying to restore her to consciousness, called the driver to his aid, who taking advantage of his momentary helplessness, first murdered him and then tried to place the onus of his guilt on the unconscious wife. For obvious reasons he was not in a position, at that moment, to say more, but if ever the man took his proper place in the prisoner's dock, which he hoped he shortly would do, it would, he believed, be shown that he had an ample motive for his ghastly crime.

With that the proceedings terminated. As the newspapers had it, "the prisoner left the court with her friends"; the truth being that she left the precincts of the court in the company of a person whom

she had never seen in her life before. That person was Mrs. Willingdon, Harry Drummond's aunt.

Harry Drummond had rushed down to see her in her Star Cross home. He had told her the whole pitiful story with such eloquence that her tender heart was filled with pity for this most unhappy child. She came to London and saw Mr. Rye and Mr. Marmaduke Prideaux, and she proved to their entire satisfaction that she was a fit and proper person to take charge of the unfortunate girl when the moment came when she would pass for ever from the shadow of a jail. Lady Lucy Mitford was still at Aix-les-Bains. It seemed that she had actually managed to conceal the fact, from those persons in whose society she chiefly was, that the Mrs. Waller who was in jail in London on suspicion of murder was any connection of hers. Lady Petersfield had written a letter, couched in scathing terms, in which she said that Lady Lucy appeared to be engaged to be married to a Colonel Straker-Squire, an aged person, in bad health, who, it was understood, had a good deal of money, and that Lady Lucy no doubt felt that if before the knot was actually tied he learnt the truth about Molly, the foolish old man would do his best to shuffle out of his ridiculous position. So, in the absence of the girl's mother, Mrs. Willingdon's offer was gladly accepted. The girl was introduced to her for the first time at the bottom of the steps leading out of the prisoner's dock, and before she had had time to properly appreciate the

situation she found herself driving off in a motor-car with a grey-haired lady by her side. She looked at the old lady with something indescribable in her beautiful eyes which, as Mrs. Willingdon afterwards said to her nephew, positively hurt her.

"I don't know who you are," were the girl's first words, "and I don't know where I'm going. It seems to me that I've ceased to have a word to say in my own movements, and that I'm just a puppet whom people use as they please. Who are you, and where are we going?"

"I am Harry Drummond's aunt. My name is Mrs. Willingdon. Didn't you hear me tell you that just now?"

"No, I didn't. I heard nothing." Molly looked at her companion as if she were considering her. "You are Harry's aunt? Oh! He has spoken to me of you."

"I am glad he has done that; then it isn't as if I were an actual stranger. I am very fond of Harry; I hope you'll let me be fond of you. I'm taking you to my home to stay with me awhile. I think mine is a very beautiful home, and I hope you will think so too. It's on the side of a hill and looks out over the most beautiful country. In one direction you can see Exeter, the tower of the cathedral, the spires of the churches, on the other is the river Exe, and the sea, and at the mouth of the river is Exmouth. You can see it all quite plainly—river, sea, and towns—and when the tide is up and the sun is shining on

the water, it is lovely. And all about me, round my grounds, there are trees, miles and miles of them, forests of trees, and behind is Dartmoor ; you can see it plainly from some of my windows. You know my country. Do you know Dartmoor ? "

"I've never been there."

"Then you shall go, we will go together. I will introduce you to what I think to be the most beautiful country in the world, and I've seen something of the world in my time. My country will put roses in your cheeks."

"But why are you taking me to your home ? I don't understand."

"Just out of pure selfishness, because I want to have you for a visitor. You see, my dear, I'm a childless old woman, and in my house there's lots of room. Won't you make me happy by coming to stay with me ? Do you very much mind ? "

Molly sighed, closed her eyes. When she closed her eyes it seemed to the old lady that the pallor of her face was like the pallor of death. Another thing which she afterwards said to Harry was that it almost made her cry.

"I don't seem to mind anything much lately ; I've got beyond all that. I suppose when we've had to bear a certain quantity, it doesn't seem to matter how much we have to bear. I've got beyond caring. I shall never care for anything again."

The old lady put out her hand and touched the girl's.

"My dear, we're going to change all that. Wait till I get you to my Devon home." The girl was silent. Her eyes were still closed. The old lady asked her, in tones so soft that it almost seemed as if she was afraid of waking her: "Are you very tired?"

The girl said nothing, but she opened her eyes and she looked at her; and after that the old lady was also still. That night she wrote a long letter to her nephew which contained these lines:

"You must be patient; we must both be patient. Your Molly has just come through the Valley of the Shadow. I don't think she realises that she is out of it yet—I am sure she doesn't. When she does I will let you know. You may be sure that she's in good hands. They say 'Pity is akin to love.' Never mother loved child as I love her. I pity her so. She strikes me as one of those persons whom God meant should always live in the sunlight, and she never has. I doubt if she's ever known the sun—if she has ever seen it. I'm sure it has never been her fate to be happy in its warmth—and she could be so happy, I am also sure of that; and she shall be before I have done with her. I think it is possible that you may have a finger in that pie—but it must not be yet. You may spoil all by coming here too soon. You can trust me—you know that. As I have said, she is in good hands. So soon as I think it well that you should come I will let you know the very first moment. When you do come I want her to receive you, if not exactly with open arms, then with

the equivalent. That is why I ask you to have patience. I know that you have been patient already—for a long time. If you will only endure a little longer I think I can promise you, Harry, that you will not regret it, that you will not be sorry. I will write you as often as I can, and tell you all the news. I will do my very best for you. I'm as anxious to have you at Somershaye, you know I am, as ever you can be to some. And I want Molly to be anxious to have you, too."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE THINGS WHICH MATTER

MOLLY was at Somershaye nearly three weeks before she even mentioned Harry Drummond's name. His aunt never mentioned it herself; she was not artless, as her outward semblance of dove-like simplicity suggested. She was pretty sure that his name would come from the lady's lips if only she had time enough to get her parts of speech into proper order, and one morning, at the breakfast-table, Mrs. Willingdon's foresight was rewarded.

"I wonder," observed Molly, "what has become of Harry. I have heard nothing either of him or from him. Doesn't he ever come to Somershaye?"

Mrs. Willingdon carefully removed the top of her egg—she had a special way of her own of doing it. Then she answered.

"Often; he used to be a very frequent visitor."

"Then why doesn't he come now? Doesn't he want to come?"

The old lady had a letter from her nephew on the table, by her plate, in which he expressed in the strongest possible terms his ardent desire to come to Somershaye. She said nothing about that letter; nothing could have been more casual than her tone.

"I rather fancy that he doesn't come because you are here, and he thinks that you don't want him."

Molly opened her eyes. There was quite a different look in them from the one which had been there that first morning with Mrs. Willingdon in her motor.

"Why should he think that? How silly—I do want him."

"If you really do want him——" began Mrs. Willingdon, then stopped.

"Of course I really want him. Why should I say I do if I don't? I want to talk to him about business."

"Business" was proving to be the one thorn in the lady's side. The gentleman known to her as John Waller had left a will in which everything he had was bequeathed to her. A good deal seemed to have been left. The lady did not know how much; she had studiously refrained from asking. She had even abstained from answering her lawyer's letters, which continually became more pressing. The same post which had brought Mrs. Willingdon a letter from Harry had brought her guest one from Mr. Rye—one which seemed to have occasioned her some concern.

"I'm afraid," intimated Mrs. Willingdon mildly, "that Harry doesn't shine very much in matters of business. That side of him is certainly not the strongest."

"Anyhow, since he's a man, he must know more about business than I do." She sighed. "I should like to talk one or two things over with him. And, of course, if he stays away because I'm here, why, then, I must go."

"I'll write and ask him when he's disengaged. Perhaps he might be able to come down one day this week—that is, if you would really like to see him."

"I should like to see him—but, of course, you needn't tell him so—that is, I mean—you know what I mean?"

The old lady fancied that she did, though her guest's expression of her meaning was a trifle obscure. She went straight from the breakfast table and telephoned a telegram to the nearest post office.

"Come at once. She says she wants to talk to you about business."

That telegram must have reached him very quickly, because he arrived at Somershaye just after lunch. He found his aunt alone in her sitting-room. The old lady observed, when greetings had been exchanged :

"Why didn't you let me know you were coming? We'd have waited lunch, and now we've just finished."

"My dear aunt, I don't want any lunch; I had everything I wanted on the way down. Where is she?"

"Mrs. Waller is somewhere in the grounds. I think you will probably find her in the rose garden—

in the arbour ; she seems rather to favour it. I've had it fitted up with cushions, and made it really comfortable."

He did find her in the arbour, to which he rushed without giving the old lady more than time to finish her sentence. She was sitting, with her hands in her lap, on her face a pensive look, as if her thoughts were far away. Then she heard the noise of approaching footsteps and looked round. When she saw who it was she stood up.

"Harry!"

"Molly!"

That was all they said for a distinctly perceptible period of time—all, which is, that is in the least quotable. When they returned to the regions of common sense the lady made a remark which, under the circumstances, might have been described as peculiar.

"I am so glad you have come; I did so want to talk business with you."

"Then talk it," said the gentleman. Then there was another interval, after which, in due course, the lady observed :

"I don't in the least know what to do about this horrible money which they will keep on saying I must have whether I like it or not. Can a person be compelled to take money whether they want it or not?"

"I've never been in a position myself which entitles me to speak from experience, so I can't quite say

how that sort of thing works out." Then he rather inconsistently added, "But I know this, if there's anything you don't want, you shan't be made to have it; I'll see to that."

Presently she observed, with an odd little smile: "I wonder if I'm going to be happy after all."

* * * * *

Only a very little while ago Mr. and Mrs. Harry Drummond were staying at Shanklin. Miss Jane Whiting paid them a call.

"You're looking very well," she said to her hostess, and that lady replied, with a smile on her face, the like of which had never been there during the days we had known her:

"I ought to be. I've only one thing in the world which worries me, and that's baby's teeth."

Her husband laughed. "As if one need worry about baby's teeth."

Miss Whiting shook her head. "A young child's first teeth are much more serious matters than many gentlemen suppose, Mr. Drummond." She turned to the lady, with the gravest expression on her countenance. "Is there any fever?" The anxious mother answered:

"Not, perhaps, what you'd exactly call fever—" Her husband interrupted:

"If you're going to talk baby I'm off. I'll have the car out and go over to Bembridge for a round on the links."

“Harry!” his wife exclaimed, “I do want to have a round with you. Can’t you wait till we’ve had tea, and then I’ll come too?”

It looked as if the lady were fairly happy. She ought to be; a husband she loves and who loves her; a healthy baby, not bad to look at for a baby, with quite a decent temper in spite of those troublesome teeth; plenty of money—these things, combined with youth, health, and high spirits, go some way towards happiness. She was an heiress in spite of herself. She had found it impossible to rid herself of what John Waller had left her. He had tied it up in such a manner that it was proved to be impossible. As it was obviously absurd to allow the income to accumulate, possibly in the end to pass to that very unknown quantity, “the Crown,” she spent it herself—at least as much of it as she wanted.

Her mother, Lady Lucy Mitford, is now Lady Lucy Straker-Squire—she is not so happy as she would like to be. In spite of his being in his dotage, her husband has not proved to be so manageable as she had hoped; the fact being that he has his own idea of the kind of life he likes to live—which is not hers. So rigid are his ideas upon this point that he keeps his wife what her ladyship calls “disgracefully short.” On more than one occasion he has declined to pay her bills—if it had not been for her daughter’s generosity she would have found herself in an awkward situation. Yet she does not consider that her child has treated her so well as she ought to have done. She

said to her sister, the Countess of Petersfield, only the other day :

“Considering what I’ve done for that child—and if it had not been for me where would she be—married to a man whose income consists principally of expectations from his aunt, who will live for ever ! If it had not been for John Waller’s money, which she owes entirely to my foresight, at this very moment she would have been worse than a pauper. Yet when I throw out a mere hint that a thousand pounds would be useful to me she reminds me that I said exactly the same thing three months ago and advises me not to go so much to Monte Carlo. One must not look for gratitude from one’s children nowadays. One devotes the best years of one’s life to them—and then what does one find ?”

“Harry !” said Molly, when they were playing that round of golf on the Bembridge downs, “if you win this hole I shan’t speak to you. You’ve won every hole up to now, and you had no business to, even if I do keep foozling. A woman may devote herself entirely to her husband, yet see how he treats her when she is playing golf. You’ve missed that putt ! You did try, didn’t you ? I’ve got mine down —hurrah ! Harry, you’re a darling. If it weren’t for these wretched caddies I’d kiss you. You wait till we get home.”

And Harry waited. Presently he missed another putt. She got hers down again.

“Oh, Harry, you didn’t try,” she whispered.

“I tried all I wanted to. That really was a first-rate shot of yours. It deserved to win.”

Molly looked at him as if she could, if she would, have said a great deal; but for the moment she refrained. Afterwards he got his reward.

